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HIGH SNOW

"GANPAT"

M. L. A. GOMPERTZ



“ ‘Ganpat’ was the sobriquet the sepoys had bestowed on the Captain when, as a very callow second lieutenant, he had been posted to an Indian infantry regiment. He was long and thin, and it would have been difficult to conceive any one more unlike the conventional presentment of the jovial, pot-bellied, elephant-headed deity of good fortune known to India at large as ‘Ganesh’ and to the Mahrattas as ‘Ganpat.’ But it was the nearest his men’s tongues could get to his real name, and so it stuck.”

—“Landgrabbing,”

Blackwood’s Magazine, 1916.

The Nagri inscription below the god’s picture is his name; pronounced “Gunput.” He is a kindly soul and even the mouse gets a meal in his shelter.

HIGH SNOW

By
"GANPAT"

M. L. A. GOMPERTZ

Author of

"THE VOICE OF DASHIN," "HARILEK,"
"THE ROAD TO LAMALAND," etc.

New York

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HIGH SNOW



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TO
NAN WISEMAN

My Dear Nan,

It is many years—in fact your hair was not yet properly up—since you did me the honour to adopt me as a very elder brother. It is only a few months, though it seems far longer, since we three—yourself, your husband, and the fool, as Yates would put it—discussed the plot of this book crossing the Anchar Lake, when you set me on the Ladakh road.


Here is the book now finished—written mostly at the end of the day's marches in the Ladakh valleys, under the passes. Lest the world entirely forget the fast disappearing mediæval idea that woman's best part is to inspire man's work, I think most books should open with a woman's name.

Since this one, if nothing else, is at least a picture of the high snows which call to you as much as they do to me, I have dedicated it to you.

Your affectionate brother,

M. L. A. GOMPERTZ.

Saser, Eastern Karakorum.



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HIGH SNOW

CHAPTER I

JOHN CALLED JOHN

"I WISH I had your luck, John," said Major George Espinasse as he turned in his chair to toast himself a little better in front of the roaring fire in John Marlowe's room at Pindi. It was a February night, and cold as a night in the Punjab can be when the snow is low on the hills to the north and there has been rain all day.

"I mean in this particular outfit," he continued, qualifying his remark about his friend, who at times had perhaps been very far from lucky. "It'll mean seven or eight months away in Ladakh, with probably another season or even two to follow—a most extraordinarily interesting piece of the world to explore, and a very sporting chance of making a decent name for yourself among the people who are interested in your line of business."

"It's a trifle monotonous at times, survey work," said Marlowe, reaching to the mantelpiece for an old, much-chewed and greatly beloved pipe. "So much of it is pure routine—watching somebody else do work, and then checking the results. But of course a show like this . . ." He pulled out his tobacco-pouch, filled the pipe, and then, turning to the table behind them, littered with maps of all sorts and kinds, selected

a heliozincographed sheet showing the now almost obsolete hachurings—the caterpillar mountains of our school-days.

“It hasn’t been tackled for sixty years, and then it was only a rough sort of reconnaissance survey with a sketchy idea of all the intervening country pushed in to fill up the sheet. They hadn’t time for more than that, for the country was far too difficult. It’s a fair sample of the whole of the Karakorum—huge great peaks, these have been triangulated pretty accurately, and they run up to 25,000 in one or two places, and there are heaps of minor bumps of 23,000 and 24,000 feet. There are great big glaciers that only one or two people have ever seen, and passes higher than any mountain in Europe.”

“And a kindly Government is going to send you up to Ladakh to survey that patch properly, on the edge of as good shooting country as there is anywhere. You’ll only be a few days from the Chang Chen-mo, which most of us have to spend months and months of pay to reach. You’re in luck this time, John. When do you go?”

“As soon as I can get over the passes out of Kashmir with the amount of kit I’ve got to take. Second week in May if the Zoji La is possible, but it’s a tricky pass and lets one down so often. I’ve crossed it four times now, and you can never count on it in the spring months.”

“You won’t get Kashmir pony-men over them,” said Espinasse, who knew his Kashmir and his Kashmiri well from many a leave spent in the Kashmir valleys. He knew the Zoji well too, and agreed with Marlowe’s estimate of its uncertain character. For a low pass of 11,000 odd feet, the Zoji can be a marvel of treachery

upon occasion. It is the gate of the Central Asian trade-route, and in the spring months as difficult a gate as you could want, with its six miles of avalanche-swept snow-beds lying between two walls of fairly high peaks that catch the last heavy precipitation of snow before you reach the more arid countries beyond—notably Ladakh—otherwise the eastern part of Little Thibet—a corner of which John Marlowe had just been detailed to survey.

In certain small circles who are interested in such things as the exploration of wild mountains, John Marlowe was spoken of as one of the coming men. For many years now every bit of his leave with one exception had been spent climbing and exploring in the Himalayas, but the country dearest to his heart was the mountain tract that separates Ladakh—and so the Indian Empire—from Chinese Turkestan. The walls of his room were adorned with series of maps on various scales of different parts of the Karakorum—some the usual antiquated survey sheets of the early 'sixties, others reproductions from the more modern records of the various expeditions of different nationalities which have from time to time ventured into that barren mountain world devoid for the most part of any inhabitants whatsoever—a tangle of bare rock and ice and snow extending over hundreds of miles. The maps were almost the sole adornment of the room—the sole, if you exclude a photo of a girl in a leather-and-gold frame, which stood upon the mantelpiece flanked by a row of well-worn pipes and half a dozen tobacco tins.

Rooms are supposed to give the key to their owners' character, and perhaps this one did, with its small array of camp furniture, its various gadgets of travel—everything designed to fold away into the smallest

possible compass. It was the room of a man always ready to move at a moment's notice, and yet of one who had, at the same time, a distinct sense of home. Only, in the case of Major John Marlowe the idea of home was fused with the ideals of the born wanderer. Home to him meant the same tent and the same books and rugs and furniture every night—each night, perhaps, in an entirely different setting. There are wanderers who love the continual variety of perpetually changing quarters—chance-found lodgments among strange peoples, wanderers perhaps in the truest sense of the word these, whose whole possessions can be crammed into a pair of saddle-bags. But there are others—such as John Marlowe, for instance—who wander just as far afield, but in an altogether different way, taking as it were their homes along too. And these last might perhaps more properly be called Nomads, moving over the world—generally a more specialised portion of it than the true wanderer, who is delighted to go anywhere,—much in the same way as the Nomad peoples—the Khirgiz, the Arabs, the Powindahs of Afghanistan—move from year to year, carrying all their belongings with them.

John Marlowe's career had been representative of that of many Sapper officers whom the Survey of India has attracted almost from its inception. Save for his time in England at the commencement of his military life, a short period on first coming to India, and for a certain interlude of war, the eighteen years of his service had been spent in producing or supervising the production of maps of the Indian Empire. Tradition and inclination alike had drawn him to India—the fifth generation of Marlowes, whose tombstones may be found from Madras in the south to the Afghan

border in the far north. Inclination primarily had made him enter the Survey, but possibly there was a far-off heritage handed down to him in his blood from that Marlowe who wandered over little-known Persia in the time when French and English were disputing who should grasp the tottering empire of the Moghuls. Since that far-off day, however, the Marlowes had displayed little if any desire to move out of the beaten track, and their record shows a dead-level of mediocrity—if, indeed, it is fair to speak of such service as they had rendered to the country they adopted for their working lives as mediocrity—honest service in no way computable in terms of the depreciated rupees they earned during that service.

Tradition also made John Marlowe a Sapper, and, as I have said, thereafter took him to India, where he gravitated northward—a new line for the Marlowes, who hitherto had only gone there on the rare occasions of large-scale frontier operations. From Pindi, where he had commenced his Indian service in a Sapper and Miner Field Company, one is only forty miles from Murree, the chief Punjab hill station; and from Murree in clear weather you may see Nanga Parbat's gleaming snow pinnacle, one of the giants of the giant mountain system dividing India from Central Asia. Nanga Parbat's 26,000 feet do not actually wall the Indian Empire in that way that the eastern Himalayas and the Karakorum do, it is true, but it is close to the borderline between Kashmir and Gilgit, dividing two altogether dissimilar countries, the former in many ways akin to India, despite its wonderful beauty of landscape and climate, and the latter a country of true Central Asian type—gaunt, barren mountains pierced by narrow valleys supporting a sparse population of men in no

way Indian for all that they form part of the Indian Empire.

Inevitably John Marlowe went to Murree on ten days' leave—equally inevitably he looked at Nanga Parbat. But, unlike the majority, for him there came then that most irresistible of calls—the call of high snow. He went home in the dusk to his room in Rowbury's Hotel after watching Nanga Parbat vanish as the sun's last rays painted all the wide-flung snow-wall of the Kaj Nag with the rose and maroon of the dying day, with the firm knowledge that some day he would follow that call.

Kashmir drew him, and he learnt the inexplicable charm of mountaineering among the peaks that ring the vale of Lalla Rookh. But always the farther, wilder ranges called to him, and from the higher shoulders of the mountain walls of the Sind and Lidar valleys, he had gazed out northward to where sometimes he caught faint, far-off glimpses of the true high snows.

The Survey of India, after the manner of all Government departments, did their unconscious best to break his heart by sending him to map the west coast of the Madras Presidency, where he sweated in dank forests among a black, aboriginal people for whom he had neither love nor interest. But at last luck changed, and he found himself once more back in the north that he loved—appointed to the frontier circle whose main business is the making of maps on or beyond the borders of the Indian Empire.

Waziristan swallowed him for a time, as it has swallowed so much of the Army in India, and for the best part of two years he had the pleasure of seeing contoured and detailed sheets growing under his direc-

tion, real maps of large areas which had been hitherto indicated only by vague hachurings or shadings and indications of routes and villages of such doubtful authority as to be frequently followed by a note of interrogation in brackets printed on the actual sheet.

Then once more he found himself in Pindi, and three months later received his orders for this Ladakh survey, upon which Espinasse was just congratulating him. It was what he had waited for all his life—to explore and map the real high snows, only whose fringe he had so far reached, and that only on brief rush expeditions in such leave as he could spare.

George Espinasse looked at his friend, who had not replied to his remark about the Kashmiri pony-men. Deliberately lighting his pipe, John was gazing into the fire the while. He was slightly moody to-night, and Espinasse wondered why. Surely now that he had been given the chance for which he had waited so long, he would forget the past—the trouble that he had been through—trouble whose full extent only Espinasse really knew.

Espinasse looked up at the photo on the mantelpiece and wondered if John was thinking of Ethel Carruthers. It was an old story now, but then John was such a fellow for keeping the past alive. He had a knack of clinging to old things somehow, and though that is a good trait, there are times when it would be better to be a little less tied to the things which have made up such of your life as is over, to be a little more free to face the present and the future.

And that page of John's life was surely over. It was four years now since Espinasse had spent the night with a completely broken-up John, the night of the day when they had buried Ethel Carruthers in the little

cemetery at Murree. The same old story—the shying pony on a hill-path, the slippery khudside below, and the rocks that, in taking Ethel Carruthers' life, had also taken the life out of John Marlowe, who should have married her that day week.

Espinasse, himself a bachelor of bachelors, had watched the progress of the engagement with considerable doubt. John Marlowe was one of the best friends he had in the world, and Espinasse was the least little bit suspicious of all women, but more particularly of those who came into contact with his friends. Ethel Carruthers was a nice enough girl in her way, but he wondered continually whether she was really the woman for John—John, who ought certainly to be married, but for whom far more than for most men it was essential that the woman should be the right one. And in Espinasse's opinion—and he knew John Marlowe well—there are not many such women.

Meantime the less John thought about the past and the more he kept his eyes on the present or the future, the better it would be for him. Probably this expedition would be a great aid to John in learning to face life anew instead of spending his spare moments thinking of the past. Against that, however, there was the danger of the long lonely months when he would have no one to talk to at all.

"I doubt your getting ponies over the Zoji as early as that," reiterated Espinasse, and John's thoughts came back out of the fire.

"I shall take coolies at Gund to make sure. It's more expensive, but more certain for the three stages over the pass to Matayan. But I wish you were coming with me."

"So do I, in parts. But not for some of your

Blondin stunts with a rope and an axe. I like moderate kind of hills with something to shoot in them. I've no earthly use for hanging on by my eyelids on the edge of precipices like you seem to enjoy. But I shall come up if I can get the three months' leave due to me for my last year in Waziristan. Two months is really too much of a rush, but for three it's worth it. I'd like to see something of the **Karakorum**, and I'd like to look at the Central Asian trade-route even though I don't want to go crawling over your loathsome glaciers."

John looked at Espinasse and smiled. He knew his friend's views on mountaineering, but he knew also that when you did succeed in dragging him up mountains he enjoyed every moment of the time. Moreover, one doesn't get the heads with which Espinasse had adorned his mess and his little place in Ireland without climbing a good many hills that in Europe would be called honest mountains.

"Well, mind you let me know when you're coming, so that I can fix up to be in the more accessible part of the ground. And don't forget I'm counting on you to join me."

"I'll do my best, John. Lord, it's just on eight, and I've got a cove dining with me in mess to-night. I must bolt home and change." Espinasse got up from his chair and collected his soft hat—gay with mallard and chikor feathers—memories of happy days away from work.

"I must hurry, too," said John. "I'm dining with the Lenox'—going on to see the Everest film afterwards."

"Wish I was—much more amusing than entertaining this bloke. But he's only just out, and some pals of mine at home asked me to look after him. Dinner

at the Lenox' is always worth going to. Well, so long—we shoot next Sunday, don't forget."

Thirty minutes later saw Marlowe entering the Lenox' bungalow. He liked both of them—Mrs. Lenox in particular, who, for all that she could frivol lightheartedly, could also be very serious and wise. Lenox and Espinasse had been fellow medical students before they entered the Indian Medical Service and the Royal Army Medical Corps respectively, and the comradeship of the early days still lasted despite Lenox having taken unto himself a wife and forsworn the bachelordom when he and Espinasse had shared quarters on first coming to India as they had shared digs in their student days.

John owed his acquaintanceship with the Lenox' to Espinasse, who had first introduced him to them, and the three men were constantly out shooting together at week-ends—week-end shoots graced generally by the presence of Mary Lenox, who was a great believer in getting her men-folk out into the open air with gun or rod.

At dinner Marlowe was placed between his hostess and Mrs. Charles, wife of an officer on the local staff. He knew Mrs. Charles to be an earnest lady, who took life seriously. She had adopted India whole-heartedly, as she did any work that came to her hand, and already, despite her short time in the country, had a knowledge of Urdu and things Indian that put the average resident of a few years' standing completely to shame.

John found himself being shown India, where he had lived so many years, from a new angle altogether—from the view-point of the newcomer, who thought instead of merely taking everything for granted—the newcomer with ideas of her own, who wanted to probe

and see for herself. It was interesting, as one thing led to another— caste rules to the purdah system, village councils to local self-government, the enormous size of the country, the infinitely varying peoples and races who made it up, the endless varieties of terrain comprised in the Indian Empire. And then from some chance remark it transpired that Marlowe was about to go up to its uttermost limits—to the real high snows—and inevitably the talk turned to the question of expeditions of all types, and so to Everest.

Whereupon Captain Charles from opposite took a hand. Like his wife, Charles was an earnest, and occasionally dogmatic, soul. He was also, however, an honest seeker after other people's ideas, though one fancies that they very rarely influenced his own already formed ones.

"But I really cannot see the good of it all," he said. "To me, honestly, it seems like chucking men's lives away for nothing. Nobody will gain anything from another expedition even if they do get to the top. The extra 1000 or 1500 feet, or whatever it is, that defeated them this time won't add anything to the world's knowledge. And when it comes to married men with children going in for jobs like that, I don't think it's right. I take my hat off to them as very stout-hearted fellows, but all the same I don't agree with their doing it. Their business is the education of their children. Surely the best thing a father can give his children is his own influence during their early years."

Charles looked hopefully at John and then at Lenox, whom he knew to thirst rather after things like Everest expeditions. He hoped to draw them, but neither Lenox nor Marlowe were being drawn on that subject. Lenox was a man who rather believed that words are

given to us to conceal our thoughts, and although he had very fixed ideas on this and kindred subjects, nothing would have induced him to voice them before any but a very select audience.

Mary Lenox adroitly slid the conversation into a different channel, and the matter was dropped for the moment, until later in the evening, during an interval in the film, honest, persistent Charles returned to the charge, tackling Mrs. Lenox this time.

"But *cui bono?* as they said of Scott, Mrs. Lenox. It seems to me this is in the same category really."

"But is a thing true merely because people said or say it, Captain Charles? If one means material results, perhaps they're right. But aren't there other greater results to be obtained from such actions as these?"

"What sort of greater results?" Charles' tone was really interested, and Mary felt emboldened to continue.

"Well, higher results—spiritual, perhaps, for lack of a better word at the moment, though personally to me that seems the right word. The example set to the world of to-day and to-morrow. You see, it seems to me that civilisation has such a tendency to make people consider life as the most precious of all things. From time to time you get catastrophes like the late war which readjust the view—unfortunately even swing the balance too far, and teach people not only to care less for their own lives but to become callous of those of others. But is life really the most precious thing in the world? Are there not aims and ideals infinitely more precious? And when there is nothing much that one is forced to risk, no persecutions or wars, for instance, there is risk of people forgetting that life is not the most valuable asset. And then it seems to

me that we have need of the Scotts—the Mallorys—the Irvines.”

“I quite agree, Mrs. Lenox. But surely the aim or the ideal should be worth the sacrifice, as it is in war. And I cannot see it in this.”

“But don’t you think, Captain Charles, that it isn’t so much the actual object or aim they try to achieve as the spirit prompting the sacrifice, which matters to the world. That their example may make others who perhaps don’t have the same values as them still say to themselves that if men can cast away their lives for such things as these, surely they also can be brave to make sacrifice for things of higher value. And I think to-day the world needs ideals rather badly.”

“I fancy I see—but I don’t agree with you quite,” said Charles, struggling with his own convictions. “The idea sounds fine, but it’s not practical enough to me, for surely great sacrifices should have practical value.”

“You’re touched with the materialistic taint of the age,” laughed Mary. “Or more probably you like to pretend that you are. You suffer from the horrible idea that obsessed us somewhat in the war, that Jones’ bravery must be applauded simply because it led to the capture of twenty German machine-guns.”

“The business men who deliver the goods, in fact,” suggested Marlowe, who had been listening interestedly.

“I see you’re both against me,” said Charles; “but, honestly, I’m not a complete materialist. Still, in a hard world, ‘delivery of the goods’ is vital.”

“Well, if you like I’ll give you the idea in somebody else’s words,” said Mary. “A woman I know—Hazel Campbell. You’ve neither of you met her. She writes verse—good verse—though I don’t think she publishes

it. This little thing she called 'Everest.' ” She looked round to see if others were listening, but the couple behind them were far too engrossed in their discussion of the iniquities of the handicapping committee at the local tennis tournament to have any ears for the party in front, so she went on softly: “It ran like this:

In the silence and the whiteness,
Blinding whiteness of the snow,
With the arching blue above it
And the mountain world below,
Stands their monument unrivalled
By Creation long ago
Carved, to man's unconquered spirit
In the peak's unconquered snow!”

Despite her low tone, there was a ring in Mary Lenox' voice as she quoted the verse which made John think of one of the women of the old tales of chivalry—bidding their men go out and face hardship and death for honour's sake. Mary was like that sometimes.

“It's very fine,” said John after the silence that followed. “‘Man's unconquered spirit in the peak's unconquered snow!’ ”

“And that surely is the whole point, isn't it? To show the world that man's spirit is unconquerable if man so chooses. That neither pain nor fear nor death can break it. Surely it is a high heritage to leave to your child.”

“And to my mind,” said John, “worth much more than the many years of parental influence that Charles talked of. The one fine effort will make more lasting impression than years of admonition—almost always weakened by the well-known fact that most children

have better eyes for their parents' faults than for their virtues."

"Not only that," said Mary, "but these men's example is not for their children alone. It may fire hundreds and thousands of others now and in generations yet to come."

"Almost you convince me," said Charles. "At least you show it me in a light I hadn't thought of so far."

And then the film came on again and put an end to any further discussion. But all through it for the rest of the evening those lines seemed to ring in John's ears, and he went home with them still in his mind—he had a retentive memory for things like that. It was a fine thought to carry through life with one—perhaps where he was going there would be times when it would be strengthening to recall Mary quoting that verse.

And that night as Mary was undressing she repeated the verses to herself. And then she reflected as she brushed out her rich, long hair:

"I could have brought up fatherless children very bravely on a memory like that. I would never have been afraid to face the world alone had Jim gone with them—and stayed."

And then she sighed a little, for among all the gifts that life had vouchsafed her, that of children, though so ardently desired, had not been granted.

CHAPTER II

INTERLUDE

MARY LENOX was watching and also assisting Ghulam Hussain, the bearer, laying out tiffin in a shady patch on the river bank below the hills of Hassan Abdal—twenty odd miles from Pindi, where her husband, Espinasse, and John Marlowe were having a Sunday shoot very early in April. Ghulam Hussain, from a coign of vantage on the cliff-like bank above her, had announced that the sahibs were even now in sight, and as it was well after midday and she had heard no shots for the last hour, it seemed likely they were returning.

It was a good lunch, for Mary was a skilful housewife and believed in making meals, as well as other domestic matters, as pleasant as possible. There were also the very attractive additions of snowy linen and glass and china; for what was the use of rendering good food unattractive by serving it up badly? Mary could rough it with any one, but she never saw any point in roughing it on occasions like this, at less than two hours' motor run from her own well-appointed bungalow, and she had an idea that men in India often roughed it quite enough as regards having food unpalatably served merely because there was no woman to keep an eye on them.

So when three figures tumbled over the edge of the bank to deposit their guns against rocks and trees and to cast aside their topees as they lay on the pleasant

little piece of turf at the running water's edge, they were greeted by large sparkling glasses of beer and shandy as a prelude to the more serious business of food—beer and shandy that had been standing in the cool water for the last three hours, and that to thirsty shikaris was as the nectar of the gods.

Mary surveyed them during the somewhat gurgling silence—surveyed them with the gaze of a mother or elder sister taking the boys out for a holiday. Jim Lenox, flat upon his back, head slightly raised against the bank, soft pattu hat balanced on one knee, stirring now and then to reach his glass—well, in Mary's eyes there was no one quite like Jim. His brown hair was still brown, and still as thick as when she had first met him. It was also just as untidy as it had been then, and the blue eyes still held much of the care-free laughter of youth, despite the forty and more years they had seen pass.

Then there was some six feet of John Marlowe under the shade of the tree opposite—he and Jim always disagreed as to who was the taller of the pair. His dark brown, almost black, hair was touched here and there with grey, and the hazel eyes were puckered at the corners with much looking out into hot sunlight, but there was youth too in that face, though faint lines about the mouth spoke to past trouble. It was perhaps a thoughtful face when you saw it in repose—Mary always imagined John as a man who thought a great deal—inclined to take things very seriously—too hardly, perhaps, sometimes.

And then Espinasse, with his jet-black Irish hair and keen grey eyes and the eternal puckers of laughter at the corners of the mouth. She didn't claim to understand Espinasse in the least, certainly not in the way

she understood Jim and, to a less degree, John. They were easy for her to read. She only knew that she liked George Espinasse and that the liking was returned, and, woman-like, that flattered her, for he was not a lady's man. She recalled a remark of his that her husband had repeated to her once: "Dogs and little children—I love 'em all; but women, they have me beat!"

She had seen him with both the dogs and the little children, and there was magic in his touch and in his voice, and she sometimes wondered what was the matter with some of her sex that they couldn't call out that magic too.

"What luck?" queried Mary at last, when the thirsty silence became more silent and less thirsty.

"Poor, Mrs. Lenox," replied Espinasse, raising himself slightly to exchange his glass for the plate Ghulam Hussain was offering him. "It's really too late in the season, and the birds are horrid wild. We only just got a dozen chikor between us."

"By which he means that he got seven and John and I collected the other five," remarked her husband. "Mary, I feel most perfectly lazy. Would you like to feed me?" He elongated himself still further, and pulled his hat over his eyes.

"Not on your life, Jim! You've come out here for exercise. If you don't sit up and eat properly, I shall tell the company how much your mess waistcoat had to be let out before the show last week."

"I've got my fingers crossed," said the voice under the hat. "And any way, it was the bad back that infernal tailor put into the waistcoat. Damn it! I've worn the thing for twenty years now, so nobody can accuse me of outgrowing my clothes."

"Yes, that's true," admitted Mary. "But you shouldn't abuse the tailor, for the way he has successively fitted new cloth, gold lace, and linings to the original buttons is marvellous."

"I see I must sit up and eat before more family pearls are cast before swine." Jim Lenox sat up and helped himself plentifully from the dish before him.

"Our John is comatose," he went on with his mouth full. "Tell him to sit up and eat too."

"His mind is in Ladakh—he's preparing to be a lama," said Espinasse. "He's practising contemplation to attain Nirvana, I expect. Pour some beer over him and point to the food."

"I wasn't in Ladakh, and I can see the food," expostulated John. "I was merely luxuriating in the sight of trees and grass, which they don't grow in Ladakh except in odd corners, as you'll find when you get there."

"You are really going, then?" said Espinasse to the Lenox' collectively. He had heard rumours about it, but nothing definite so far.

"Yes, really truly," replied Mary, balancing the fruit salad. "It's all fixed up now. Jim's got his leave, and he's going to spend six months of it up in Ladakh giving a hand in the mission hospital at Leh."

"Their doctor's going home on leave, and I said I'd do as much of his job as I could for as long leave as I could get. He comes from near my village at home, and I've met him several times. I'd like to lend 'em a hand—it's the class of missioning which I approve of. It's a much sounder line to doctor the heathen than to try to educate him. So somewhere in May you'll see us hitting it for Leh. Only, Mary must buy an outsize

sun topee and give me a brolly to carry, or we shan't look the part."

"They don't do that sort of thing in the Moravian mission," put in John. "They're very human."

"Then I really must come up to Ladakh this summer," said Espinasse, "since you're all going. It's fifteen years now since I saw it. It's a good country after its fashion. Lots of room and lots to shoot, and quaint beyond belief, with lamas and monasteries and yaks and oddments like that."

"When you come we'll call in Major Marlowe from his glaciers and hold a reunion," said Mary.

"When does your leave begin?" asked Espinasse.

"Seventh May," replied Jim Lenox. "I've got to wait until my relief arrives. Mary's going up to Srinagar a fortnight ahead if it's as hot as it looks like being. Mary, after that meal I shall never hit another bird. I'm going to lie in the shade for hours and thank the gods for tobacco." He was feeling for his pipe as he spoke, and suddenly pulled out a couple of letters. "Hulloa, I forgot these! Mail came in last night apparently, due to the arrival of a viceroy or a commander-in-chief or something funny, so the P. & O. ran in a day ahead for once in a way. There's two letters for you, Mary. If they're bills I refuse to know anything about them."

"Bills!" retorted Mary scornfully. "That's Aunt Ethel, and that—why, it looks like Alison Seymour." She opened the second letter and read in silence while the three men, conscious of a few hills climbed, a few birds killed, and a notable meal consumed, absorbed tobacco in supreme content with only one fear on their horizon—the dread lest some one else might suggest their doing anything strenuous.

"I suppose Alison could get a pass," said Mary at last, putting down the letter she had been reading.

"What in?" queried her husband dreamily. "Is the girl going in for an exam.?"

"I mean a pass to go to Ladakh," explained his wife.

Jim Lenox sat up, or nearly so.

"Does she want to come out here? What's the matter with her?"

"Not only wants to, but is coming. She sails on the eighteenth—Friday week. She says she must get out of England, and so she's coming out here, and if we can't put up with her she'll go somewhere on her own. Of course we can put up with her, but she'll have to come to Ladakh now. She'll like that—she wants to get a complete change, I think."

"I expect she does," said her husband. "Well, cable to her what she's in for. I suppose that means I shall have to bring her up to Srinagar," he added mournfully.

"Yes, I'm afraid it does," said Mary. "No nice bachelor journey after all—wife and other baggages sent in advance. Cheer up, Jim. You know you like Alison."

"I love the girl, but I hate her prospective luggage. For the Lord's sake, tell her that clothes are not worn in Ladakh."

"Better let her have a couple of pair of riding breeches and a shirt or two, with a skirt for Sundays. Sun's horrid warm up there sometimes, and the nights are cold," put in Espinasse. "Is that the Miss Seymour whose uncle bought the place next to us?"

Jim Lenox nodded assent, and Espinasse looked grave for the fraction of a second—just long enough for Mary to notice, and she wondered how much of

Alison's history, or rather of the history of her people, he knew.

Mary and Alison had been at school together, and Alison looked upon Mary still as an elder sister—a charge that Mary was willing enough to accept. And Mary understood—indeed the letter made it transparently clear—that Alison felt she must come out to Mary's strength and help—to Mary who might help her to forget a little.

"She must be pretty well off now," said Espinasse. "All her uncle's money went to her, I think."

"It did," said Jim drily, "but I'd rather do without that and do without the rest of the inheritance. It's a cruel life with that hanging over your head. And she's a fizzing good sort of a girl, too, which makes it worse. You knew the uncle?"

Espinasse nodded and looked at John Marlowe, who was shamefully sleeping.

"The fourth of them to go the same way, wasn't he? There's no doubt about insanity being hereditary in this case, whatever it may be in others. The grandfather, the father, and then two out of the three sons. There's a sister too, Miss Seymour's aunt, who, if not certifiable, is precious near it. Sort of family history the Eugenists love quoting."

"I wonder how Alison keeps up under it," said Mary. "Fancy living with that fear hanging over you. Wondering if and when you'll follow to an asylum. But I don't think she will, all the same. To me she always seems extraordinarily sane and very brave about it all."

Stirrings on John Marlowe's part indicative of returning consciousness put an end to the matter of Miss Seymour for the moment. John sat up with the lust of slaughter in his eye, and demanded to be led forth

against the chikor once more. He had shot badly that morning, and of the five which Jim had claimed for the pair of them only one had fallen to John's gun.

"You're too vilely energetic, John," said Jim, lazily. "There aren't any blooming birds; we're too late in the season. This place has probably been harried all the cold weather. Keep your energy for your Nubra glaciers."

But John was adamant. Had they not come out to Hassan Abdal expressly to shoot chikor? Admitted that the morning was the best time, still the birds could also be shot in the evening as well, and he was not going home with one solitary hen to his credit.

So with a sigh Jim hauled himself to his feet, and the three men set out once more, leaving Mary to her letters and her thoughts.

She re-read the letter from Alison twice over. It was a long letter, for Alison could write letters to those she cared for. And to Mary, who had known her so long, it seemed that there was fear in it—the fear of the hunted creature seeking some refuge. There was the desire to get away from everything and everybody she knew except Mary and her husband. Out here Alison felt there would be new life, new people, little if anything to bring up the nightmare past. Perhaps in the new surroundings she might escape for a time from the fear that haunted her continually—the thought of the dread heritage of madness that might—probably would—some day be hers. Would Mary take pity on her and let her come to them? But come to some new land she must, and India had always drawn her.

Of course Alison was welcome any time and under any conditions. Not for the world would Mary have

refused her—nor Jim either, for that matter. They had no children to consider—they were alone, and if anything happened, well, between them they could see it through. Alison should come and stop for as long as she pleased.

It was three years since Mary had seen her, and that was the occasion when the doctors had finally decided about the uncle with whom Alison had been staying—with him and his sister, the aunt whom Espinasse described as almost as far gone. Mary had suggested to Alison the wisdom of seeking some new surroundings—of coming out, perhaps, to India for a while—but Alison then would not leave home. She had been fond of her uncle, who had shown her much kindness. Moreover, then, she had talked greatly of facing things out—of not giving way to fear.

But now the fear had evidently become too great, and she felt that she must at all cost get away. What Mary had not mentioned was the passage in the letter which showed definitely that the aunt was following rapidly, and for her too it was only a question of time. Alison felt she owed nothing to her aunt, who had always been in a way jealous of her niece and for whom she had entertained a strong dislike. Only her affection for her uncle had ever kept them under the same roof, and with his death a year before that link was broken irrevocably.

“Well, Alison won’t be alone in the darkness now, thank God,” said Mary mentally. “At least she will have two people, and one of them a woman, who will understand and help as far as they may. But oh why, oh why are such things allowed? What right had her father ever to marry knowing what he did?”

And that reflection brought up the thought of Alison

of eight years back—Alison caught in the war-wave, when for a man to ask seemed reason enough for woman to give—to give everything that might make life sweeter for a little space before the mud and the slime should call the men back—back to almost certain death; Alison torn between that desire and the fear of what she would become—of saddling a man with a lunatic wife—worse still, of bringing children into the world with that dread heritage hanging over them. A very likely prospect, too, for both the man and Alison had been Catholics, and every one knows the views of the Catholic Church on the subject of children—their production or not. And so he had gone back, and, like so many others, died—died in such fashion that a tortured woman's mind might construe it as having cast away life since it could hold no further joy.

Mary sat up and brushed some crumbs off her neat grey skirt and straightened the soft hat that cast a shadow over the clear blue-grey eyes. She shifted her position to lean against the bole of a tree, and sat there, hands clasped round her knees, looking out over the sparkling sunlit water with eyes that saw nothing of the scene in front of them.

She was trying to look into the future and see what it could hold for Alison as the years went on, and it seemed to Mary that there could be nothing but loneliness ahead. She felt sure that Alison would never risk marriage now, and felt too that she was right—she who had fought the question out once, and won, in utter bitterness of soul; at a time, too, when the odds against her holding out were far stronger than they ever could be again.

Mary had been at home then—Jim had sent her home when he went out with the earliest expeditionary

force from India, and she had remained at home for the first three years of the war, and she and Alison had lived together for a time. Mary recalled the nights when she had striven to comfort Alison, to help, as far as it may be given to one human being to help another face fear, or to act in what seems to the harassed mind the best way.

Mary felt that then she herself would have given way, but then she had not Alison's strange strong faith that somehow exercised such an intense hold over people of all types. And yet at the time, and now still, she felt that Alison had been right; that to yield would have been wrong; that for reasons known only to her Creator, Alison was to be debarred from all the fulness of life—was to live out her days in loneliness and in the shadow of a great fear. But why, oh why? Perhaps it was for some great purpose hereafter, but of that Mary never felt quite sure. If there was a hereafter, it couldn't possibly be anything like the hereafter that people preached about. Perhaps Alison was nearer to the secret, and perhaps that was why she, and those who believed like her, could be so strangely strong at times.

The afternoon drew on into evening, and the sun sank towards the low hills in the west as Mary sat there. Perhaps Ladakh would bring solace of sorts; everybody who'd been there seemed to describe it as a sort of Kingdom of Forgetfulness—a country of quiet dreams. Perhaps there was something after all in Buddhism that made for dreamy content; people seemed to think so—some even went so far as to profess a modified form of Buddhism—or to say they did, and nowadays so few people profess anything very seriously.

She was so wrapt in her thoughts that she never heard the others return until they dropped on top of her clamorously demanding tea.

"You've been asleep, Mary," said Jim Lenox, looking at her. "Your eyes are all wrinkled up."

"I haven't really," she laughed. "I've been thinking, and you always tell me that's a strain for a woman."

"Fatal thing, my dear. If women would give up thinking, half the beauty specialists would go out of business. I've warned you about it often. Come back to earth and hand out tea. Moreover, I observe honey. I see also you have had the good sense to provide jam for John and Espinasse and yourself, so that no one can stop me licking the honey-spoon presently."

"Your manners, Jim, get worse with increasing years. I'm sorry to say that people tell me one should take Swiss milk for the journey up, as one can't always get fresh on the Ladakh road. You shall therefore have tea by yourself."

"Golly! Think of it. Bread and Swiss milk! Mary, let us march up very slowly. We might halve all the marches and lay in a double stock of Mr. Nestlé—the thick kind—none of your useless fluid."

"Pass the cake, Major Espinasse, and we'll try to forget him until he's finished the honey. Why didn't we bring the dogs? He could have had tea with them in peace and quiet.

"Peace, but not quiet," observed John.

"I sit corrected," said Mary. "Imagine the luscious sound of Jim and Major Espinasse's Wog respectively cleaning out a Swiss milk and a sardine tin. Talk about listening to the *nouveaux riches* enjoying their soup!"

"Let us drop these personalities," observed Jim at length, ostentatiously licking the honey-spoon for Mary's special benefit. "Let us revert to the all-important question of shikar. I wish to register my protest at having been dragged out this peaceful evening in order to observe John removing the tail feathers of two unfortunate chikor—when I might have been sleeping peacefully. I hope that by the end of the year he will have taken sufficient exercise to make him a little less energetic. I also have a small proposal to make, which is that, if possible, we should go up part of the way together. I might say that this was for the pleasure of John's company. But he knows me for a truthful soul, and therefore the effort would be wasted. But an extra member in the party means extra tins of Swiss milk, and I know John hates the stuff and you and Alison won't touch it. Ergo!"

"Ergo, I shall be a free woman earlier than I hoped. How long does gout take to kill? But to be serious, it would be topping. But perhaps Major Marlowe would rather go on his own. I expect he's got a lot of kit to get up."

"Not so much as all that, Mrs. Lenox. I'm not an international expedition for catching legendary wild animals with cinematographers in attendance. I'm only a humble *naqsha walla*, and there'll be ponies enough for us all without trouble provided we make a start on a day when no one else is moving. I should love it simply."

"Then we will advance on Ladakh under John's guidance, and he will give us preliminary lessons as to how to distinguish a yak from a lama, and such-like important matters."

"And in the meantime," said Mary, "I suggest we

retire on Pindi under Jim's doubtful guidance. It's getting late, and both spares are punctured."

"And the road is not so frequented by impressionable youths, nor is it so well provided with cover, as those at home. I fear, therefore, that I might be called upon to mend my own punctures instead of utilising my wife's looks, which some people are inclined—foolishly, to my mind—to admire. India has its disadvantages. We toured for four months last time we were at home, and I never mended a puncture. Mary has the perfect helpless female air when necessary, and I enjoyed many pipes in the seclusion of quiet hedges while immaculately clad youths from sixty-horse-power tornadoes and the like grovelled in the dust with jacks and tyre levers. They even used their own vulcanisers, to the benefit of my running bill."

Jim rose lazily from the ground and wandered over to the car despondently to wind her up—the self-starter being temporarily out of action.

Ten minutes later saw them speeding down the road towards Pindi in the growing dusk—the stars creeping out above them in the cloudless sky, and the great hills on their left growing into formless shadows, beyond, far beyond which lay hidden the high mountains, at whose feet they were to spend the next few months of their lives.

But Mary seemed somehow to see them, and to see also the figure of a woman among them—a woman seeking to face life as bravely as might be in the shadow of a great fear—Alison in Ladakh. Well, if any one might hold her spirit unconquered, it was, to Mary's mind, Alison.

To John also, as he looked out northward, it seemed that he could see the high snows beyond in his mental

vision. And to him also it seemed that a woman was there—that the dream-vision of Ethel Carruthers, which, softened now by time, less sharply defined, but perhaps all the sweeter therefore, would be nearer to him among the high snows, which had called to him so long.

CHAPTER III

THE EXPLORER

THE Residency garden in Srinagar was gay with colour one early day of May. The wonderful expanse of turf that makes you think you are back in England instead of in a corner of Asia, for all that this particular corner is the heart of Kashmir—an artist's and gardener's paradise—was set off with the vivid colours of tulips in ordered beds, beyond which showed the lilac hedges guarding the quiet garden from the road beyond, where passing motors fling up trails of dust. Masses of guelder roses made white splashes below the rich green of the new leaves of the four great chenars flanking the long lawn leading up to the house, chenars in glory of spring raiment. Bright colours of women's dresses, too, for there was a tennis party in progress, and though many of the guests were in the sober, conventional white that in theory belongs to summer games, others, with frankly no intention of playing, had come in more vivid hues, that seemed to vie with the uniforms of the scarlet-clothed chuprassis hovering in the background.

Not all the men were in tennis kit either. Here and there were the "store suits" of ceremony—the starched collars that one hopes will some day disappear along with the other instruments of refined torture which a more humanitarian age has relegated to the limbo of oblivion, but which still may be seen in the glass-fronted cases of museums.

Most of the guests were birds of passage, some were residents or quasi-residents, but these last were in the minority. Srinagar has a brief season, or, to be correct, two brief seasons, the first in the spring, the second in the short space between summer and autumn, when Gulmarg becomes too cold to be completely suitable for the festive round, and the plains of India, whence come the majority of the Kashmir visitors, are still too warm for comfort.

Mary Lenox, who on the strength of her arrival nearly a fortnight earlier felt almost an old resident in this city of the waters, was sitting alone at the moment watching the crowd. It always interested her to study her fellow-mortals, to try to read behind the mask that nearly all men and women wear in the world, to weave stories in her fancy about the people she met or saw.

"Looking for 'copy' for another book, Mrs. Lenox?" said a feminine voice behind her, and she turned to meet the quizzically smiling gaze of Mrs. Dashwood, who settled into the empty chair beside her.

Mary had produced two novels, the first of which had attained a certain modicum of success—in fact, for a first book quite a large amount; the second was not doing so well. Mary herself—possibly rightly—attributed the difference to the fact that in the second she had been foolish enough to draw life as she saw it, whereas in the first she had served up what she herself called "pink icing"—harmless and light food.

"Not really," said Mary with truth. "Merely watching people without any ulterior motives."

"There's lots of people here you could put into a novel," said the elder woman, as she inserted a cigarette into a very long and ornate holder. "We get all sorts in Srinagar—good, bad, and indifferent."

"Which being interpreted means uninteresting," said Mary mentally. Mrs. Dashwood also had an observant eye and a very attentive ear. She had also, however, what Mary had not—a fluent, if sometimes incorrect, tongue, and was a self-constituted authority on the acts, words, and even thoughts of most of the people who had been in Srinagar or Gulmarg in the last fifteen years.

"We've not got many of the best specimens on view here to-day, though," continued Mrs. Dashwood. "Between you and me, I call it rather a dull afternoon. There are the usual young men and girls who come because they're good tennis players, which always seems to me rather a futile reason for asking people. And the rest seems to be made up of big-game hunters and that class. You can tell them by the way their collars seem to be choking them. I really don't understand that type of man. Look at that one there, now—talking to Stella Harrison. I first met him fifteen years ago up here, and I've met him any number of times since and never yet found anything interesting about him."

"You mean the tall man in grey," said Mary. "I was rather wondering who he was—I've not seen him before."

"Alec Cunningham is his name. Spends his life in the back of beyond and comes back to civilisation to refit and get away again as quick as he can. I believe he's an international authority on Central Asian glaciers. Apparently there are people who take such things seriously. Perhaps always living in a sort of glacial age has frozen him up, but he has no conversation and no decent interests—at least, none that I've ever discovered. And he lives the most peculiar sort of life even when he does come back to civilisation. He

has to be dragged out by violence to any place where there's danger of his having to talk to a woman, and when he has to, he either seems tongue-tied or else talks about the importance of work and the general seriousness of life. However, I suppose it's lucky that he does live alone and that no woman has the awful fate of having to live with him. If he did own a wife, he'd keep her in a corner of his tent with his dogs—he prefers a tent to a house, or says he does, and I think he tells the truth there. There's Stella escaping from him now. I'm off after her—I want her for my dinner on Monday."

But when she had gone, Mary Lenox sat there thinking. She knew the name of Alec Cunningham—an explorer of considerable note so far as she remembered. Her husband was somewhat of a mountaineer, and she recollected his having made some mention of Cunningham. But he hadn't spoken in quite the same tone as Mrs. Dashwood.

Before she had time to recall what the exact facts had been, she was gathered up into a four, and for the moment forgot about Alec Cunningham of the Central Asian glaciers. It was not till late in the evening, just as she was leaving, that she thought of him again as he passed her by the gate—a tall figure in grey with a lean face and eyes that seemed to be looking through infinite spaces.

"Hulloa! Isn't that Cunningham the explorer fellow?" she heard a man just behind her remark to the girl he was with. "Wonder where he's off to this time?"

"Walking again," replied the girl. "I met him two years ago, and he'd just walked seven thousand miles.

He's like Felix—only he's not in the least entertaining. Felix at least makes you laugh."

"And, like Felix, will probably come to a bad end. Break his neck or have his throat cut by one of the scallawags he always tows round with him. I don't think he has a civilised servant. I passed his camp this morning, and the outfit seems to consist of a couple of nasty-looking Pathans—two enormous Airedales and some woolly-looking objects from Gilgit or Kashgar or one of those God-forsaken places where I'm glad there's no danger of my ever being. . . ."

The conversation died away as the couple passed her and turned off towards the club, and Mary, looking after them, filled up in imagination the missing words of the speaker—an ultra-smartly clad youth up on leave from his regiment at Peshawur, spending his two months in a round of mixed tennis and dancing as a change to the horrors of life in sight of the frontier hills. She remembered talking to the young man, who had been overjoyed at seeing in the papers that morning that his battalion was under orders for Bangalore in the far south of India. He had been eloquent on the horrors of the frontier generally, and the Khyber in particular.

Then as she looked after the tall figure swinging on down the road, she wondered what lay behind the mask, or whether the mask for once displayed the real man.

Alec Cunningham, quite unaware that a hundred yards behind a distinctly attractive and clever woman was thinking deeply about him, went on his way to the Dal Gate. Not that he would have believed it had he been told, for he had come to the conclusion that he bored nearly all women to tears. He never seemed to get the correct subjects for conversation, and when he

really did get launched he generally found his hearer veiling yawns in about three minutes. There were exceptions, of course—his hostess of the afternoon had been one—but the exceptions were rare.

He pulled out the beloved pipe which had been denied to him for the last five hours, and, reaching the Dal Gate, hesitated. The evening was a remarkably beautiful one, even for Kashmir—the sky was nearly but not quite cloudless, for over towards the Sind valley were faint little rose-flecked cloudlets above the blue hills. To the south-west the whole wall of the Pir Panjal stood up clear yet soft in a long unbroken line of snow peaks—not the high bare peaks where Alec Cunningham felt his life's work lay, but the softer, friendlier little mountains forming a girdle round what to many people is the most charming valley in the world. Before him, beyond the shikaras and country boats crowding the Dal Gate through which the waters of the Dal Lake pass to the canals flowing into the main Jhelum stream, showed long vistas of willow-fringed water-ways—silver green of willows above the lilac and mauve and silver of the clear water. The sun had already sunk below the horizon, but here and there on the higher snow-peaks still lingered some of the last glory that flushes the snow into warm life at dawn and dusk, as a lover's kiss sends the blood mantling to a girl's cheek. A full moon was already casting splashes of molten silver into the waters in the darker shadows of the trees—promise for a night of rarer beauty to come.

A passing tonga driver hailed Cunningham as he was lighting his pipe. Most of the people about the Dal Gate knew that long, spare figure whose camp was half an hour's drive round the farther shore. Again Cun-

ningham hesitated; then with the air of one who has made a sudden determination, or has mentally already broken through a reservation of long standing, he passed down the steps, and, waving aside the hustling crowd of boatmen, deliberately selected a shikara and, settling down on the cushions, told the men to row him to the Nishat Bagh.

It was not the most direct way to his camp, which was nearer to the Shalimar; but he felt disinclined for work this evening, and though mere disinclination was to Alec Cunningham the last of futile reasons for not working, to-night somehow he felt that he wanted to break every rule of life he had ever made. It was not rebellion against the self-made rules whereby he governed himself—to-morrow they would be in full strong swing again—it was the sentiment that impels you now and then to let your dogs run wild, just for once.

Just for once he wanted again to drift lazily over the moonlit waters—to pass by the dream-garden of the Empress Nur Jahan; no, he would not enter it, but he would pass near by and see the shadowy outlines of the buildings and trees set there by the woman who had been the soul and inspiration of an Emperor whose power ran from far Kabul among the Afghan snows to the surf that beats on the far southern shore of this immense sub-continent—so often miscalled a country.

He sometimes thought—when he thought about such things at all, which was rarely—another of his rules of life—that he and Nur Jahan would have understood each other even though she was a woman, in fact really the more so because she was one. She would have understood his dreams, his aims, his view of life.

The blue dusk cleared again as the moon swung up higher sending long shafts of rippling silver over the

slightly moving waters. The shikara was now past the lights of the house-boats—the yellow stars of light where people lived in boats among the willows and spent their days either feverishly following a social round no whit dissimilar to the ones they had left in India or elsewhere, or else, more wise in their generation, perhaps more fortunate in their company and circumstances, merely dreamed away their time in long expeditions round the lake, drawing renewed strength to face life and work again on their return to the world it was set down for them to live in most of the year.

If you live by a set of self-made rules, as did Alec Cunningham, once you break away temporarily from one you will swiftly break away from the others. At least most people do, and he was no exception. As the shikara cleared the point of Kuttar Khan, with its little summer-house and tall poplars ghostly in the moonlight, his mind went drifting back into the past, and this time for once there came no strong hand on the curb. Back it went like a riderless horse—now racing wildly, now straying slowly, now stopping to nibble at some savoury pasture. Thirty years and more it traversed into the past—the past that can be both dead and, oh, so vividly alive—and there it stopped, and then to Cunningham it seemed that even the very air about him was fragrant with a sweetness that permeated his very soul—a sweetness that for all he turned his thoughts from it resolutely year after year, had yet somehow been his strength in the years of unremitting work and hardship, in frequent peril from the elements, from the treacherous mountains that still he loved, from the even more treacherous men who had at times been his sole companions.

Once again there was full moonlight on the Dal; once

again the rush-grown waters narrowed as they drew closer to the bridges near the Nishat; once again, or so it seemed to Cunningham—and who shall say that he was wrong?—the one woman was there with him actually bodily and not merely in mind or thought or perhaps spirit. Almost he seemed to hear her very voice as on that last long evening, their last together, unforgettable, when she had sent him away to face life as she conceived it must be faced by men and women if there is to be life at all hereafter—bravely and sturdily doing that which has been set as your task despite the mere fact that every fibre of your being may cry out to do something else.

Very honestly had Cunningham striven to keep faith, very bravely had he faced the years—the sacrifices. Great sacrifices had there been—the greatest of all known only to himself—surmised or guessed at, perhaps, by one woman very far away. Some day there would be reward—at least, so it seemed to him at this moment—certain reward. At other times his mind was beset with doubts—perhaps there was nothing beyond, no hereafter; perhaps when sudden avalanche, or swift bullet or slower knife, or mortal sickness in some far-off place with none of his kind to help, should close the book of life for him, he would merely vanish from conscious being for all time. Or again, sometimes he would think that there would be a hereafter but no reward, and that his failings, his lapses—magnified, perhaps, from his inherent tendency to underrate the good and overrate the bad in himself—his intense consciousness of his own shortcomings, would be set against him, and that the hereafter would be as here but harder still.

Nevertheless, through storm and shadow, through

doubts and fears, he had done his best to keep faith after his fashion, and just to-night he felt certain that the Maker of the mountains would be kind in the end, and let him have the happiness he craved so much, some infinitesimal part, as payment for what he had done, the infinitely greater balance as gift from what some one has happily termed "the infinite courtesy of God."

Once again she seemed to be with him in free communion of speech and thought, and Alec Cunningham was in no wise tongue-tied or boring, as all the inner soul of him was poured out at the feet of the woman he had loved, in gifts utterly beyond the limited comprehension of the Mrs. Dashwoods and the great multitude of her like; for the lover like the artist is rare, indeed, and Cunningham had loved as it is given only to the very few to do.

They lingered awhile in the little lakelet facing the Nishat as they had done those long years before, and then passed out through Akbar's bridge to the Bod Dal and made their slow way towards the Shalimar, beyond which lay Cunningham's camp. The magic of the night grew more and more, the wonder of that mystic presence permeated Cunningham's entire being, soothing him and filling him with new strength once more after the harassing months he had been through preparing for the great journey that lay ahead, his seventh venture to the Heart of Asia.

Then suddenly she was gone, and he was alone again in the shikara and became aware of the paddlers behind him—came back to life as it has to be lived; and had Mary Lenox been watching him then, she might have seen the mask snap back into place as he sat up from the drowsy, recumbent position on the cushions and refilled his pipe.

No longer was Cunningham the lover and dreamer there. He was hidden again behind the mask that the years had fashioned. But if that mask was perhaps boring to those about him—if at times it seemed harsh and repellant and lacking in all human interest, was there not something to be forgiven it because of what it veiled, and above all because of the years of struggle, of self-repression, of high courage which had gone to its making?

A few minutes later the shikara had drawn up at the landing-stones by the Shalimar, and Cunningham was paying off his boatmen. The Kashmiris departed wondering and loquacious, for he had grossly overpaid them, and, like most of Srinagar, they knew him for a hard man to bargain with and a bad man to trick. And since dishonesty and trickery are as the breath of their nostrils to the Kashmiris, they gave him grudging respect. And for once to be overpaid by the master of the hated Pathan servants and the equally detested great red dogs, was something to be loquacious about indeed.

A brief five minutes' walk saw him entering his camp, where two deep-barking Airedales leapt upon him in noisy joy, and a grinning, hook-nosed Pathan rose up out of the shadows to take his hat and stick and then to vanish to hurry the cook with dinner. Alec Cunningham might have few or no graces to charm the world of civilisation and conventions, but to certain dogs and wild men he was little less than their conception of God, and perhaps the dog and the wild man form a fairer judgment of men than many people who are much higher up the scale of life.

Cunningham entered the big tent in the lamplight, and, squaring his shoulders, sat down at the much-littered writing-table on the far side—a scarred and

battered folding-table that had travelled with him many thousand miles over mountains and deserts, on pony and camel and yak, but rarely on any wheeled form of transport. There would be perhaps five minutes to wait for dinner, although his cook was a wonder at producing dinner whensoever his master returned. That five minutes could be filled with some little job of work, and therefore filled it would be.

Boris and Nushka, the Airedales, had settled either side of him, Nushka already asleep again on the thick Khotan numdah, one of several about the floor. Boris was sitting up, with his great head resting on his master's lap, half dreaming, half watching.

As Cunningham pulled out a roll of maps from the mule trunk, which, when at rest with its twin, formed a book-case on the left of the table, he glanced round the tent which with its predecessors had been home to him for so many years. It was a pattern of his own and comfortable—comfortable as only those who spend long years in tents can make them. Crowded it was, but everything had its place, and the arrangement yet left space to move about. Everything had a history to it, each article of well-worn furniture evoked some memory of far countries, each scar and dint held a little story of its own, even the repairs neatly done by the hand of Darweza Khan, Cunningham's oldest follower, contributed their quota to the story.

The Yakhdan book-cases were well filled with books—worn and faded veterans they also, though here and there newer binding caught the eye, young recruits with their marches yet before them. The most were books of travel, bound records of geographical associations of different countries, and a row of six neatly bound

diaries each with a date running over two or three years—the fruits of his wanderings.

Two books also from his own hand—the hardest work he had ever undertaken, for the gift of the fluent pen had been denied him. All that was his was the gift of meticulous accuracy and unlimited capacity for taking pains. They were his contribution to the knowledge of the mountain systems of Central Asia, and are quoted by many scientific bodies as standard works of reference. But to some people those books seemed to hold more than dry-as-dust knowledge; they held—or their readers imagined they held—something of the personality of the writer, and for such the hard, angular corners of the writing seemed to be softened by a wide sympathy, a kindly outlook on life, and, to the few who look for such things in books, an intensely Christian atmosphere.

The company was completed by a small row of well-worn classics—both verse and prose—often the sole companions of his own tongue to whom he could turn when the day's work was over. Cunningham would, however, have included Boris and Nushka as speaking his own tongue also. He had a strong prejudice against foreign dogs, holding that for a man or woman of the British Isles the proper companions are the dogs whose ancestors for hundreds of years have shared the work and play, the sorrows and joys, of his or her forebears.

In this too he was supported by his men, who never spoke to the dogs except in what they believed to be English. True, the dogs didn't actually speak it; but because the dog has been denied the faculty of speech it doesn't follow that it can't understand, and a dog whose racial memories have been built up with English-

speaking folk must obviously understand English almost from its birth.

The cook was, however, quicker than ever to-night, and before Cunningham had time really to study the map he had unrolled on the table—a new edition to whose making he had contributed very largely—a movement at the far end of the tent announced the arrival of Murteza Khan with dinner, and the dogs stirred expectantly, and leapt to their feet as Cunningham rose, selected one of the little volumes—Shakespeare's comedies, it was, in a worn green binding—for he always liked company at meals, and crossed to the little camp dining-table where Murteza had just set down the soup.

He was never lonely thus with many people to talk to, or rather to listen to, and the dogs beside him talking after their own fashion until their own meal was brought in and there was noisy silence of hungry dogs.

Dinner finished, Cunningham sat over his coffee smoking the one cigarette of the day as a prelude to that best of smokes—the evening pipe. The force of the rules had sprung back, and the Dal Lake and the Shalimar were locked away from his conscious thoughts.

"Little dogs! Good dinner, little dogs?"

The two great red heads came up simultaneously, and four large paws were laid on his lap as two black muzzles nuzzled at his coat, while the wagging tails gave the affirmative answer.

It was grace after meals, and Cunningham added it mentally to his own for the simple meal he had had. He was not a prayerful person, but he always returned thanks for dinner, and he felt that he ought to include the dogs as well, since he had an idea that man is, as

things are at present, an intermediary between the dog and the dog's Maker—that the dog only knows God through man. He also believed that this will probably continue hereafter, and that Boris and Nushka will climb heavenly mountains and chase heavenly birds for ever. Only, it will be with him, and not, as some people hold, in a specially constructed water-tight dogs' heaven somewhere in the backyard of eternity.

CHAPTER IV

ALISON SEYMOUR

FULL dawn had just broken on the Sind River between Shadipur and Gandarbal when Alison Seymour pulled back the curtains of the window above her low bed and looked out from the house-boat in which she and the Lenox' were travelling from Srinagar to Gandarbal, where they would take the road in earnest for Ladakh—for the country which Mary had described to her as a land of dreams.

They had left the Jhelum River during the night, and a fresh cold breeze playing through the half-open window caused Alison hurriedly to pull on a warm dressing-jacket ere she sat up farther. The boat had stopped for the moment, doubtless for the towers to rest, and the bend of the river they were in gave a clear view of the great mountains ahead.

It was a perfect dawn under a translucent sky of softest blue, below which stood up great mist-wreathed mountains, blue also in the distance, while here and there snow-clad peaks flamed into gold as they caught the first rays of the sun. All about was green and silver—silver of fast-moving water and green of rushes and poplars and willow and turf—green shadows in the water, silver splashes on the underside of the poplar leaves. Through the opposite window of the queer little room with its crude wood-carving showed the far white line of the Pir Panjal, somewhere beyond which—

thousands of miles and, it seemed to her, aeons of time away—lay all that Alison had left.

There was a crystal clearness in the air and a sense of infinite distance as one looked out upon the great hills ahead, in one of whose deeper blue-shadowed valleys wound the road which she would tread. She had read every book about it she could lay hands upon, and already her vivid imagination could picture it—the long winding road among the great pines and firs—up and up into the realm of the silver-barked birches and the margs gemmed with myriad wildflowers—up higher still to the rocks below the snow above the tree-line, and then at last out on to the white expanses of the great snow-fields. And then on and on into a newer country still—to a land which some people describe as God's rubbish-heap, but which to other minds is more likely to be part of His workshop—to the little-inhabited spaces at the foot of the giant mountains—heights mostly untrodden, rarely even seen, by man, where century after century the immense peaks and glaciers lie in still silence, broken only by the crash of avalanche and the low whisper of slowly moving ice-rivers. A world of silence and loneliness, but yet certainly fulfilling some purpose, since to Alison there could be nothing in the whole universe which did not play some part in the scheme of things. The purpose of the great mountains she made no pretence to divine—maybe they were merely one of a hundred *chefs-d'œuvres* on the walls of God's palace, framed there for His own pleasure; maybe they had stood there for a million years to produce some desired effect on some individual human soul—perhaps her own, perhaps another's—perhaps a soul yet a million years unborn. That also she could understand, for to her way of belief the creation of the

Himalayas—nay, of all the mountains in the world—would be well justified if it showed God to a single human soul.

Perhaps they were set there for healing—for the healing of sick souls such as hers. She pulled her fur coat about her, slipped on a pair of fur-lined slippers, and stood up at the open window—tall and straight, with the fresh breeze playing through the long dark hair that clouded her shoulders. Yes—oh, if only that was their work, how she would love them! If they could bring peace and content and quiet hope! A tag of a quotation came into her mind as she stood there in the morning silence—from what book she knew not at the moment—knew not even if it was a quotation at all, or merely a thought from her own mind:

I will lift up mine eyes to the hills
Whence cometh my help.

Oh, if only she could find that from the hills ahead, glean strength to face such life as might be granted to her—to carry through whatever task might be set before her with honest endeavour and high courage!

And somewhat she felt that perhaps such would be granted to her—that she would emerge from the valley of shadows where she had marched so long, into light and peace; that this very perfect morning was an omen for the future—one of those promises that come sometimes to the soul to bid one be of good heart.

Then she pulled the folding wooden chair up to the window, and, picking up the little book that lay upon her dressing-table—the Roman Missal, it was—sat down to read the mass—the words that have been comfort to so many for nineteen hundred years.

Alison was not a Catholic by birth—she was what some people call a convert and others a pervert, that is to say she had joined the Roman Church when she was twenty entirely of her own volition and with no one apparently to influence her in the matter, for among her friends there were but few Catholics, and those not by any means close friends. Mary and Jim classed themselves as pagans, meaning thereby that they really could not believe in what they had been brought up in, and preferred to be honest in the matter. For census purposes they were referred to as Church of England—their friends would have applied the broader title of Christians.

But somehow or other Alison had joined the Catholic Church because she felt she belonged there, and from it had drawn strength to face her life, a life which those who knew her best called an extremely hard one. And that presumably is what religion is for—to enable one to make the best of one's life here—that is, to make the best of oneself—to fit oneself best to do one's share of the great scheme.

"May I come in, Alison dear?"

Mary's voice broke upon her reading, and Alison put the book back on the table as Mary entered.

"Isn't it a perfect morning? I thought you might still be asleep, and I felt you oughtn't to miss your first sight of this. Jim and I have seen it three times before, but he's up on the roof now in his pyjamas and poshtin drinking it in again."

"Tell her to shove on something and come up and see the hills," called Jim's voice from the door at the end of the dining-room. "Anything'll do—there's no one about. The Manjis are having some tea in the cook-boat—that's why we've stopped."

So Alison, hurriedly twisting up her hair into a pattu hat, went out and climbed the ladder in front, and the three of them sat there muffled in fur coats, Jim's pyjamas of a wonderful mauve protruding below the skirts of his great yellow sheepskin poshtin.

"There's the road to Ladakh, Alison—at least that's where it runs, although you can't see it. Up that wide valley in front. And if you want to go farther it will take you all through Central Asia and out into China. And all the way you will have to walk or else ride on ponies or yaks or camels—all the woolly animals you read about in the nursery. Think of it!"

There was an enthusiasm in Jim's voice that would have been infections if any of them had wanted infection, which they did not.

"I thought one rode woolly llamas with humps," said Alison, matching his tone.

"No, that's the kind with two L's and four legs. The Ladakh ones have two legs and only one L, and are more greasy than woolly according to John, who should be waiting for us at Gandarbal with a nice camp ready pitched. Also breakfast."

"Meantime, what about chota-hazri?" put in Mary. "Shout out to the cook-boat, Jim, and tell them to bring it up here. I'm not going to have mine in a room when I can have it with scenery like this."

"Ahoy there! Cook-boat, ahoy!" shouted Jim. "Always have to be nautical when in a boat, Alison. I brought a little brochure of nautical terms with me. When at Rome it's important to do like the Greeks."

Then he relapsed into the vernacular, shouting for morning tea.

Ghulam Hussain appeared on the ladder—that is to say, that his head peeped in among the flower-pots with

which the Kashmiri boatman likes to adorn the roof of his house-boat.

"Lāya, Sahib, Lāya." And the head vanished once more.

"What does Liar mean?" queried Alison.

"What it says exactly. It's called the hopeful future perfect, and means that he has brought the tea—in other words, that the kettle is very nearly boiling. Otherwise he would have said 'Lāta,'—'bringing,' which means that he has just realised that tea is wanted and is about to awake the cook to light the fire, or words to that effect. That's the conditional future. Grammar always was my strong point. Ask Mary. I unsplit her infinitives when the writing habit overcomes her. You haven't taken to writing books too, I hope, since I last saw you? It's the modern vice. Mary thought seriously for a long time which she would adopt—morphine or a typewriter. I regret to say that she adopted the latter, as you know. Some day there will be a photograph of me in the horrid snob weeklies—'Mary Lenox, the well-known novelist, at her week-end cottage, with dog and husband; latter can be distinguished by turn-down collar—dog's is straight.' "

"You should adopt a counter-vice, Jim," said Alison.

"I dare not. A novelist's husband must be like Cæsar's wife—*sans peur et sans reproche*. He may have to support her when she addresses mothers' meetings on the laziness of work—the future of the past—the iniquity of justice. Think of the horror that would overcome the audience if they discovered that the husband of their idol was secretly addicted to chewing-gum! Aha! Tea in the offing—nautical again, you see; come on, sonny!"

"Does he talk like this every morning now, Mary?"

"I'm afraid it's your arrival that's upsetting him. He generally snores until breakfast-time, but ever since he got to Srinagar he's been like this, and getting worse. Here, Jim, pass me the milk."

"It's stuff out of cows—Mary, you're a fraud. I thought I had been promised Mr. Nestlé, the world's cow. I shall return to Pindi and ask for my money back!"

"Pass the milk, Jim, and don't be an ass!"

"I pass it—under protest. Meantime I shall eat one of the last remaining mangoes that Alison brought up from Bombay. Observe my perspicuacity in telling young Hobbs to meet her. She cast but one languishing eye upon him, and the youth invested his substance in a large basket of Alphonse mangoes to keep her company in the train. I hope you promised to write to him, Alison—don't break his young heart! It's a nice child, and almost the perfect A.D.C."

"He really was very kind and thoughtful."

"'When love is turned to kindness,' as the poet says. Alison, I'll tell you a secret. Hush! I am about to become a poet. I have bought a stenographer's pad and a cross-word-puzzle book, and with them I shall compose a sonnet every morning on the way. I thought out the first this morning while shaving. It is almost classical:

Kind Mr. Colgate—Lord of Soap,
I pray you, do invent a dope
To depilate my bristly chin
If rubbed on once when turning in.

Mary will probably crib that for her next book—that's the worst of these novelists. There's no trusting them, they'd steal the shirt off your back and call it 'copy.'

However, meanwhile, here are mangoes, so let us drown our sorrows. Mary, can I have my bath brought up? I want to eat my mango in comfort."

"You'd sing if you had it here—so you can't. Why does a man always sing in his bath?"

"Because it's the only time he feels safe from women. But I once knew an unfortunate who was caught out one riotous evening after dinner when music was going strong. He swore he could only sing in his bath, so his hostess had a bath brought in, and he was duly sat in it and made to sing. Good! We're under way once more. Listen to the merry noise of the turbines."

The "turbines" indicated were three stalwart manjis hauling on the tow rope with monotonous but musical shouting, while in front of them, in a diminutive set of breast harness, the small son—aged fivish—of the boatman set the pace. The Kashmiri child seems to amuse itself in this way as it plods along in a nightgown-like garment, for a while in front of the towers, probably under the fond impression that it is pulling the boat, although the length of rope between it and the leading man is trailing on the ground. At other times, armed with a tiny paddle, it sits in the bow and splashes, while its elders drive the shikara onward with powerful strokes behind.

"It's a great life, isn't it, Alison?" said Jim, serious for an instant. "If you were a millionaire you couldn't buy a breakfast room like this or a dining-room such as we shall have to-night and for heaps of nights afterwards."

"And the great silence of night in the hills—and the rushing snow water—and the moon coming out above the snows," said Mary, who had spent many months camping in Kashmir. "There's no life quite like it anywhere in the world, to my mind."

"Oh, it's going to be good," said Alison. "You

don't know how grateful I am to you for letting me come."

"The pleasure is mine," said Jim. "I shall get an extra ration of Swiss milk and watch you drink your tea neat. And Mary's frightfully pleased, because you'll help her wash her hair in Leh, where they haven't got a coiffeuse, or whatever you call the damsel what bobs, shingles, and the like. Alison, we are your debtors!" He rose and made a mock bow, gathering the skirts of his poshtin round him. "Meanwhile I go to bath lest Mary get there first."

He hitched up an imaginary pair of trousers in the music-hall nautical style, and with a loud "Yo ho!" vanished down the ladder, and presently discordant sounds from the rear end of the boat indicated that his bath had claimed him.

"What utter babes men are!" remarked Mary with something in her tone that implied that not for the world would she have them any otherwise. Then she followed him down the ladder, and presently Alison returned to her little room to finish her devotions, for it was a Sunday, and incidentally to dress for breakfast. Already the big chenars of Gandarbal were in sight ahead—as yet far off, but another hour should see them getting ready to disembark.

And as she dressed she prayed in a fashion—prayed that content—she had ceased to pray for happiness—might lie in front at the end of the long road; then prayed that whether it did or not, she might remain mistress of her soul, and play her part as she was wanted to play it, come storm or sunlight, come sorrow or joy.

An hour later they stood on the roof of the boat as they drew close to the bridge, and saw just beyond it

on the right bank, on a stretch of pleasant turf, littered here and there with great trunks of felled trees waiting to be floated on down the river, a neat camp laid out, where a tall figure in khaki shirt and shorts was coming down from the tents to greet them.

John Marlowe had already met Alison several times in Srinagar, but never did he think she had looked so well as she did that morning when she stepped on shore in her new clothes of the road—long-skirted coat above neatly fitting breeches and stockings, a splash of colour about her throat where a gay scarf matched the bright little plume of feathers tucked into her soft felt hat, eyes alight with the joy of life and all the freshness of the morning in her face, whipped into slight colour by the cool breeze.

And to Alison it seemed that John was somehow typical of this new life that she was going to lead—that there clung about him an air of wide spaces, something of the magic breath of the hills—something quite different from the life she had known hitherto. It was not so much a liking for the man himself that she felt as a liking, nay, a love, for the life he symbolised to her at that moment, which came over her as she responded to his greeting:

“Morning, Miss Seymour—morning, people! Isn’t it a topping day for the start? I’ve got everything fixed, and we push off at the streak of dawn to-morrow. There’s no one else in view so far as I can make out, so we shall have the road to ourselves unless any one comes in during the afternoon. Breakfast’s just coming on.”

He guided them to their tents, which he had had pitched close to his own, and Alison entered the little

eighty-pound tent that was to be her home for the next three weeks or so, for they were going slowly.

Alison had never seen anything that pleased her quite so much as that little tent with its tiny camp-bed and chair, and when they had brought her things up from the boat and she looked round it, she liked it more than ever. It is an experience to live in a tent for the first time in your life at the age of thirty-two. When, moreover, the view from your open tent door is a Kashmir valley, it is an experience well worth having.

The simplicity of it all charmed her—she who had lived in luxurious comfort all her life, for Alison was and always had been well off, both in her own right and by that of her relatives.

But despite that fact, there was in her a leaning to simplicity—a dislike of many possessions—a certain gypsy strain that surged up now and again. And to-day as she stood in that little tent it seemed to call more forcefully than ever—to tell her that it was here that she really belonged far more than to the life she had always led at home.

And so she came out to breakfast, for the table had been laid in the open air, and the four of them had their first meal on the road—the meal which always, in a way, seems a sort of sacrament, binding wanderers together for the journey before them.

“To-morrow Kangan—day after, Gund—one day’s halt there to change ponies or take coolies if the reports of the Zoji are bad, and then on—I hope straight to Dras,” announced John while Alison listened as intelligently as she could to the programme. The names were familiar to her from the guide-book, but naturally they conveyed to her nowise what they conveyed to the others, two of whom knew the road as far as Dras,

while the third knew it for another three hundred miles beyond. To the man or woman of tents and marches, the names of halting-places evoke vision after vision that no guide-book can ever give; the memories of the past crowd up—the good days on the road, the pleasant halting-places, the wayside encounters with people of like mind.

“Tents all the way, please,” said Mary. “No rest-house—they spoil the whole thing.”

“Rest-house at Baltal so as to make it easy to get off early in the morning, and you will certainly be glad of them at Macchoi and Matayan,” said John. “Otherwise I agree. I hope you have told Miss Seymour the horrors that await her—that those who are not out of their tents at 6 A.M. have them let down on their heads, and so forth.”

“John mistrusts women in camp,” explained Mary.

“With the exception of Mrs. Lenox,” qualified John, who knew what Mary was like in camp—no duck was more at home in water than Mary under canvas. John divided women into two classes—those who might safely be taken into camp and those who should never be let out of a house. He hoped Alison might belong to the former, but as yet his hope by no means amounted to a belief. He would know more to-morrow after the first march—better still when it came to crossing the first pass.

CHAPTER V

JOHN AND ALISON

TWO mornings later, at Gund, a clatter of enamelled iron aroused John Marlowe from his slumber, and turning over sleepily he realised that his bearer—ancient, red-bearded Mohomed Din—was putting his morning tea on the leather yakhdan beside his bed. He looked at his wrist-watch and realised that it was already past five o'clock, and that he was due to set out with Alison Seymour at a quarter to six. They were halting one day at Gund to change ponies, and the energetic John had announced the previous evening that he proposed to climb the hills to the north of Gund for a matter of four thousand feet or so in order to, as he phrased it, "exercise" the new telephoto lens purchased for his big camera, which had only reached him from home just before leaving Srinagar.

His further announcement that from a point up there which he knew of you could see Kolahoi, the highest mountain in Kashmir, had fired Alison's imagination, and she had asked to be allowed to accompany him, adducing as reason that during the war she had done official photography. The ease with which she discussed focal lengths, diaphragms, plate speeds, light filters, and such-like mysteries, had impressed John considerably, making him feel that he was talking to a sister craftsman. Moreover, the girl could certainly walk—possibly, therefore, she might also be able to climb. She had scorned the pony produced for her at

Gandarbal and come the two marches up to Gund at an honest three and a quarter miles an hour on her well-arched feet.

Wherefore John had replied that he would be indeed delighted if she would come, and he would do his best to point out to her the various peaks which should show up if only the day were fine. There had been clouds and intermittent showers the last two days, but on the previous night the sky had cleared and the long vistas of snow crowning the high limestone walls of the Sind River had shone clear above the dark curtains of pine and fir and the fringes of silver birch that hung below them.

He swallowed his tea and toast as he dressed hurriedly, and, coming out, saw Alison in the tent they used for meals waiting for him with the lunch-basket ready packed.

Ten minutes later saw them passing through the village on the steep path leading up to the heights behind. At the end of nearly an hour's steady climb they halted for a few minutes, and Alison for the first time looked down from above on to the panorama of the Sind valley—long vista of terraced fields green with the first young rice, set here and there with villages shaded with big walnut trees under the shadows of great hills towering five and six and seven thousand feet above the fertile valley through which ran the silver ribbon of the river fed by the melting snows around.

It was a nearly cloudless day, and the air of a fresh transparency such as one finds only in the hills. About them the trees thinned more and more, showing now only in the folds, for the slope faced southward and, like all such slopes in Kashmir, held far less trees than

the one across the river, where the northern aspect allows the snow to melt slowly, and thus the water, draining more gradually, permits the growth of thick forests of pine and fir.

Alison stayed there drinking it all in—the soft freshness of the morning, the clear, soft colouring, the quiet of it all, and more than ever felt then that she had at last come into a land of peace—that she had embarked upon a voyage which in the fulness of time might lead to content and peace of mind.

John, watching her seated on the edge of a great rock, reflected that it was pleasant to be on a Kashmir hillside on a morning like that with a woman who could climb a hill like Miss Seymour, and there was a vague idea in his mind that it would be very pleasant if she were only going to be climbing with him in the Nubra—among the gaunt savage mountains where there was no soft beauty of trees and flowers, only the wild beauty of naked rock and snow and the ever-changing colours cast over them by the passing sun. He had now definitely classed Alison as one of the women whom one might safely take into camp, despite the fact that in Srinagar she had borne such a completely civilised air.

To Alison herself it seemed that she was more at home here than she had ever been in her life. The sparsely furnished little tent gave her a greater feeling of security and comfort than had ever been hers in a house. The long marches were sheer delight—the wayside halts, the evening camps; all things hitherto unknown and yet somehow altogether familiar were to her entirely fascinating, while above all there was the continual joy of the unknown—the desire to see round

the next corner of the road—to explore the wonders hidden behind each new mountain shoulder.

“Isn’t it topping, Miss Seymour?” said John. “Essence of Kashmir—firs, birches, and high snow. Not that the snow is really high,” he added, as his passion for accuracy overcame him. “One oughtn’t to talk of high snow when it lies between 11,000 and 14,000 feet, and lower in the shady places. The real high snows don’t begin until you get well out into Ladakh, and find your passes of 17,000 and 18,000 feet and your peaks from 20,000 to 25,000.”

“For me it’s high snow,” replied Alison. “I’ve never seen anything higher than the Alps before, and then only as a tourist flitting from hotel to hotel in an over-luxurious car. One didn’t live among the mountains there as one does here—at least one didn’t seem to. One was a mere passing stranger, but here they seem to claim you so much more.”

“Wait until you’ve seen Ladakh and the real high hills,” said John as they set out to climb again, the coolie with the lunch-basket and John’s survey peon toiling behind them. “These are tame, friendly hills, but out there they’re quite different. They’re friendly in a way, but at the same time they’re savage. They’re so immensely big—everything on such a huge scale, down to the very rocks that they sometimes chuck at your head. You feel awfully small and powerless and—and . . .” John was not a very skilful talker.

“Proper-sized,” suggested Alison, guessing at the thought behind the words. She had come to the conclusion that John was rather a humble person for all that he could be forceful enough with coolies, animals, or people generally who showed signs of shirking.

“That’s the word I wanted—proper-sized. Very

small in comparison with the things round about—the hills, the stars, the snows.”

“In comparison with life really,” concluded Alison. “Mountains do give you that feeling, and I think it’s rather a good one really. Prevents one worrying about oneself too much sometimes, if one realises that one is quite a small pebble—not even a rock.”

The slope growing steeper and steeper put a stop to further conversation for the time being, their efforts being limited to occasional monosyllabic remarks as peak after new peak came into view. It was four good hours’ climb before they halted at the foot of a snow-slope above a glade of twisted birches, and John, turning, pointed out to Alison a high cone-shaped mountain rising above the hills on the opposite bank.

“There’s Kolahoi, Miss Seymour—17,800—far and away the biggest peak in Kashmir proper. It’s only once been climbed, and the party were roped for sixteen hours. And they had spent the night at 16,000 before starting on the ascent of the last bit. Finished on the very top, which just then was a cornice sticking out over a drop of about four thousand feet practically sheer. And to do it they had to go up a long arête with more or less a foot in each valley, climbing over forty-foot gendarmes of very rocky rock. Must have been a good show.”

“I should like to do something like that,” said Alison, as she gazed at the great pyramid towering above the blue shadows of the lower hills.

“So should I,” said John.

“Not for the mere fact of doing something that hadn’t been done before,” added Alison, “but for the good feeling of confidence that it would give you in

your power of facing big things and coming out on top. Oh, it must be fine!"

But John was silent now, thinking. Most of the world knew John as a man with a mania for climbing high hills, crawling about glaciers, clambering over precipices and other such places where sensible people didn't go. Some few of them admired him for it—young subalterns these, mostly—the rest merely called him mad. But none of them knew or suspected that the main reason which prompted him was the fact that in his secret soul John was afraid of the mountains and therefore felt he must face them.

They called him—they drew him like a magnet, but the more they called him the more he feared them—their immensity, their loneliness, their treachery. John could visualise it all. He knew them so well now—the perils of slipping snow and falling stone; all the dangers that the ordinary mountaineer only thinks of when he has to devise some way of combating them, were to John Marlowe ever-present bogies from the time he left his camp till the time he returned.

And therefore he came always to the mountains to face the bogies, to grapple with them. Kipling somewhere has a passage to the effect that to every man is given his own peculiar fear against which he must fight as the price of his manhood. And to John Marlowe—mountaineer in the fullest sense of the term—the peculiar fear allotted was the fear of the high hills, of the great glaciers.

But not even Espinasse knew that. It was a secret very tightly locked away—a secret that none save Ethel Carruthers had ever known. John had been hard hit then, as happens often when a man of his temperament does fall in love, and he had spread his soul out at the

feet of the girl he loved. Ethel Carruthers, who would have made the most admirable wife for a commissioner whose headquarters were in a large cantonment, or for a secretary to Government, hadn't seen more than a tithe of what he had laid out before her, so for John it was probably fortunate that she had insisted on riding the borrowed pony of a cheerful subaltern friend, much against prudent John's advice, who knew both the owner and the pony.

As a consequence, she now remained the very perfect ideal in John's mind—the dream-lady whose image was always before him—who would give him the courage to face the work he considered as his—who would be with him more than ever in the high snows. So perhaps it was not only John who was fortunate, for it must be better to remain a perfect ideal than an unsuitable reality.

"It must be fine," repeated Alison, turning round to see why John was silent. "That's the sort of thing you'll have a chance of doing now up in the Nubra. From what you say, the peaks there aren't known at all."

"I don't suppose I shall do so much of that really. I shall be merely climbing as much as I have to for the work. But that will probably take me pretty high." He turned to unpack the tiffin basket, and thereafter the conversation returned to the lower levels of cold pigeons and hard-boiled eggs, of the Indian's idea of tea, which, if he is allowed to make it, is of the colour of ink, chiefly perhaps because then it can be re-brewed several times when master has finished with it.

But during the long descent John was slightly annoyed with himself. And the reason for his annoyance was that several times Alison seemed to have somehow

obscured that other vision that had been so long his constant companion. He had found himself making comparisons—reflecting on Miss Seymour's way of tackling a hill, her knowledge of photography, her understanding of maps. Ethel invariably rode if riding was at all possible, and if not, generally took up a commanding position with the lunch-basket until the walkers should tire and return. Calculations, maps, machines, and such-like, had frankly bored her, but then, as John reflected, these are merely accessories to life. There is no necessity for the perfect ideal to worry about focal lengths or methods of making tea—and Miss Seymour appeared very worldly wise in such things. She seemed to be rather a practical sort of person—one, moreover, with a good appetite—much concerned about matters like meals.

But nevertheless the slight comparisons had annoyed John; there was somehow a taint of disloyalty about them which went against the grain for all that they were quite involuntary and only referred to externals of extremely small moment. He forgot about them presently, however, when they reached the camp again on the open stretch of grass by the serai and saw John Lenox sleeping shamelessly in a long chair with a paper over his face, and Mary, who had seen them coming, busy with the tea-things. Yes, on the whole it had been a pleasant day, and, after all, the fact of having enjoyed a companion who understood telephoto lenses was not necessarily an imputation against his loyalty to the perfect ideal. Probably nobody had ever taken the trouble to explain such things properly to Ethel.

The voices aroused Jim Lenox, who removed the paper from his face and sat up.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of

the workers—I mean walkers,” he misquoted, sitting up still further. “Through a telescope I have watched John’s armoured beetle-crushers advancing up the slope to the gentle patter of Alison’s brogues. Through thousands of feet have I watched them, thanking the gods that they were not mine. It is far more blessed to watch than to work, and with the solicitudinous eye of an uncle I have watched and thereby more than earned my tea. I have not had a meal since lunch, and I observe scones. Mary, I shall never divorce you.”

He pulled his chair up to the table, helped himself largely to strawberry jam and scones, and then announced that he had made all arrangements and that the ponies for the morrow’s onward march were already assembled.

“They’re all scared stiff of the Zoji La at the moment,” he continued. “There’s a Dras caravan just come in who lost three men and three ponies crossing the pass. The poor devils were late in starting, and then a pony threw a load just about the worst part, and while they were trying to reload it down came an avalanche, and that was that. It’s rather late in the year for that sort of thing to happen, but of course snow’s late. However, I think we’ve got hold of good men, and we’ll beat them out of Baltal as early as possible.”

“The Kashmiri would rather start late and risk avalanches than get off the mark before daylight,” remarked John. “But I suppose if you haven’t got too much in the way of clothes, it’s more pleasant to wait till the sun’s up before you move than to be under way by four. But they’re a senseless, improvident lot at best.”

Tea over, Jim roused himself to sufficient energy to

take a rod, in the hope of catching snow-trout, and he induced the ever energetic John to accompany him. Alison, who was frankly tired after her climb, was glad enough to retire to a hot bath. But she had thoroughly enjoyed her day, and it was very pleasant afterwards to laze in a low rurki chair and watch the snows changing colour as the sun went down. She had a keen sense of colour, and the landscape with the dark pines and firs under the red and gold of the snows—fast fading into maroon and then to cold blue and white as the sun vanished—gave her something like a physical pang of joy, and, as always, brought to her mind the thought of the Artist who paints those pictures day after day for those who have eyes to see.

She had a book on her lap—Browning, it was—an old and much-worn volume that travelled with her. It had belonged to her mother, and she treasured it as much for that reason as for the author's sake, greatly as she loved his verses. She had never known her mother, who had died when she was only a few weeks old, but she had conceived an intense love for the woman whom she knew only through the descriptions of others. She wondered now as she sat there, looking up the Sind valley, whether her mother had ever been there—her people had been for a time in India. She was sure that her mother would have loved it, for somehow she felt that the intense passion for beauty in her own nature must be an inheritance, that it was not a chance gift. She could not explain why she felt like that, but somehow she did.

And the thought of her mother brought up the thought of her father dead some two years later, and with that came the memory of that other inheritance of hers, for her father had had to be confined in an asylum

some months before her birth. Of him she seemed to know far less than of her mother, but that might have been because she had been largely brought up by her mother's younger sister, and Miss Adelaide Fraser's nearest approach to a quarrel with her adored elder sister had been when the latter announced her intention of marrying George Seymour.

The underlying reason, of course, had been money, badly lacking just then in the Fraser family, and, burdened with debts and with an income insufficient to keep up his estate, old Mr. Fraser's one idea was to see his daughter married to the wealthy son of his very wealthy neighbour. To Adelaide Fraser the thing was wrong from the beginning. George Seymour was, to her simple way of thinking, entirely unsuitable for Alison—moreover his father was undoubtedly mad, and for that alone he had no business to marry Alison. But most of all to Adelaide the greatest of all reasons was that she was convinced Alison was not in love with the man. Adelaide was of the romantic temperament and, in spite of her Scots upbringing, could not wean herself from the idea that love without marriage is a better thing than marriage without love. Adelaide had lived her life unmarried, and all the natural tenderness which should have found outlet in a child of her own had been lavished on little Alison, whom she had received from the arms of her dying sister. But never had she really replaced the mother, and Alison grew up to know her dead mother as depicted by the words of the sister, who had quite simply adored her. Naturally, therefore, her father filled but little space in her mind.

The voices of the men returning roused her from her thoughts, and she opened the book casually as one does if one does not want to be caught in the heinous offence

—or rather the terrible vice—of thinking. She opened it at random, and her eyes caught the lines of "One Word More":

All my hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving.

She pictured to herself what those lines must have spelt for the Brownings—the complete and perfect companionship that it showed—and she shivered a little at the thought of the loneliness that must inevitably lie before her. The last colours had gone now from the snows, which gleamed coldly white, and there was a cold breeze playing about her.

Then the men came up the bank, and in the fading light she listened to Jim's voluble explanation of why there would be no fish for dinner. Being a true fisherman, he did not include in his list of reasons the mere fact that he had caught none.

The next day saw them on the road to Sonamarg, winding their way along the pleasant stretches of grass land about Gagangir and up the rocky path under the great cliffs before Sonamarg, where the foaming torrent of the Sind River poured down between the abutments of the broken snow bridges, and in the darker corners the great slopes of tumbled snow spoke of the spring avalanches. The day after—with the shortest of pleasant marches behind them—they settled into the rest-house of Baltal at the foot of the Zoji La.

Above them high battlements of rock framed the entrance to the north-western gate of Kashmir—battlements of rock carved into strange, fantastic shapes like the towers of fairy palaces. The road zig-zagging up the slope towards the path was crossed here and there by long white snow-slides, and the winter road up the deep ravine still showed as a dark trail over the fast-

breaking snow blanket that for several months had hidden the stream.

That night Alison walked out after dinner to look up towards the pass, with the feeling of adventure strong upon her. To-morrow she would climb higher than she had ever been in her life, save for that day at Gund, and she would cross from the known to the unknown—from Kashmir, which was in a way familiar, with its gardens and verdure, its little wooden houses among the laughing fields, into another country where there would be neither forest nor meadow—nothing green save the little isolated spots of human habitations set among the giant naked hills.

The air was cold and clear, and in the starlight she could see the snows of the pass with, to either hand, the dark shadows of the great cliffs. In front of her, shifting lights showed where the servants and ponymen were having their evening meal, and close by were the shadowy shapes of the ponies, tethered there to prevent them straying and grazing on the poisonous grass of the hillsides.

Then she became aware of a figure a little farther in front, and realised that John Marlowe was also there, apparently looking at the pass. She wondered what he was thinking of and whether the pass could now hold for him the enchantment that it held for her. But she was very far from guessing what he really pictured as he stood there looking up at the dimly seen snows.

For John Marlowe the picture framed there was something she could not see—something that lay a few miles farther on—the long stretch of the pass between Kain Pathri and Macchoi. And for him it was daylight, and over the white surface moved a long straggling caravan of laden ponies plodding through the

softening snow, while alongside of the animals walked the weary figures of men clad in shapeless duffle clothes and felt leg wrappings.

A little group moving in the centre, well separated from those in front and those behind, stopped just under the lee of a small rise, and he could see three men busy with one of the animals whose load had slipped. Then he seemed to hear the sudden noise—the rush of wind—to see the startled animals plunge and the load dropped as the men gazed wildly round to see which way to bolt before that white wall pouring down upon them from a curving valley to the right. Saw also their faces as they realised that the width of the avalanche gave hope neither to left nor right. And as the wall swept over them and settled in a long tumbled hillock of still gently moving snow, he wondered whether that would come to him also, and if so how he would take it.

An instant later he heard Alison and turned, feeling interiorly as if he had been caught in his bath. But before she reached him the imagination which had somehow been planted in the middle of John's otherwise essentially English composition had been suppressed, and it was matter-of-fact John Marlowe, sapper, who responded conventionally to Alison's "Isn't the snow wonderful to-night, Major Marlowe?"

CHAPTER VI

THE ZOJI LA

IT was three o'clock of a cloudy morning at Baltal when Jim Lenox came out of the rest-house with a hurricane lantern to see the ponies laden for the day's march over the pass. It had clouded over during the night, and now and then fell occasional drops of rain—rain that would mean snow higher up. Behind him the windows of the little two-roomed rest-house glowed with a pleasant radiance—a spot of bright light among the dark shadows of the birches all around. Before him among the dark blurs marking the outhouses and servants' quarters, a ruddy glow showed where Ahamdu, the Kashmiri cook, was brewing a large degshi of tea before starting, and dark figures clustered about the doorway, making no attempt to saddle the ponies or rope up such of the loads as the servants had already brought out of the rest-house. Much of the baggage had not been unroped the day before in order to facilitate the start this morning, and still lay piled up in the verandah next to the cook-house, so that Jim Lenox felt wrath in the matter.

The Kashmiri ponymen, cold and lethargic, showed no desire to turn their hands to anything—it was cloudy—it was inclined to rain—it would be better to wait for daylight—it might be better to wait till next day—anything, in fact, was better than setting to work now.

But, as always, Oriental lethargy had to yield to

Occidental energy, and the energy which some few thousand Englishmen, Scotsmen, and Irishmen contrive to infuse into a few hundred thousand Indians and so convert three hundred million people into a flourishing concern known as "India" had its effect. When Jim, assisted by Ghulam Hussain and still more so by the energetic Indian mail overseer whose business is the supervising of the mail service across the pass, winter and summer alike, and who had volunteered to help the party over—he being the friend of a friend of Jim's—had personally seen to the loading of four ponies, the remainder of the ponymen took heart of grace, or rather made a virtue of necessity. Before long most of the loads were roped up and some of them actually on the ponies, to the usual accompaniment of the mutual recriminations and the shouting and squabbling which seem the natural outlet of the Kashmiris, who have never dared to raise their hands against their fellowmen and therefore for very many centuries have inevitably been ruled by outsiders—at the present moment by that very stalwart fighting race, the Dogra Rajput of the Jammu Hills.

"Nearly four o'clock now," remarked Jim to John, who had come to help him. "Not too bad, all things considered. It's getting worse, and we're in for snow on top, but if we stopped here to-day we should possibly find the pass closed all to-morrow. I think it's going to snow all day now."

"If we get away now we shall be up at Kain Pathri by seven, and there's no more climbing after that. Six miles of snow-plodding to Macchoi, and then the descent, which is sure to be horrid soft. But the great thing is to get started. I'm going to shove off my lot now, and yours can follow."

He vanished into the gloom, and Jim gathered from the moving shadows that the leading ponies were already on their way down the steep little path to the bridge across the Zoji stream below, whence they would begin their long climb up the summer road. Mary and Alison were waiting ready with the riding-ponies, but the latter had announced that she meant to walk—any way as far as Macchoi. Was it not her first real pass? Mary, who had no illusions in such matters, declared her firm intention of riding every foot of the road.

To Alison the undertaking possessed every novelty. To climb up and up into the now cloud-veiled snows over a road that has been trodden for thousands and thousands of years by wanderers and merchants—to realise that the halts they would make, the streams they would drink from, would be the same halting-places and the same streams used by men dead and gone thousands of years before she was born; that the baggage ponies were in all probability equipped still in the same way as were their predecessors in the time of Alexander—odds and ends of coarse rope and saddles of sackcloth and straw; that the stages they would make each day were the stages set by the natural limit of the marching power of men and animals and the same now as in Caesar's days—all this was enchanting to Alison—to Alison, in whom day by day that strange wanderer's instinct seemed to grow stronger and stronger.

Then there would also be the new feeling of marching under the snow-slopes—of being at the complete mercy of the mountains—of knowing that at one moment she might be in full strength and vigour and the next a twisted nothingness buried fifty feet deep under

the weight of hundreds of tons of snow. It was a new, and in its way a good feeling, she thought; it seemed to lift care from her mind, to soothe and calm her, that very feeling of powerlessness, that knowledge that of herself she could do nothing—that she was at the mercy of nature, which for Alison meant quite simply in the hands of Him who had made all things, including nature.

And as she swung up the steepening path, taking a short-cut to pass the slowly moving ponies—a short-cut that put her well in front but left her breathless for the moment—she felt somehow that she was leaving the old life behind—that over the pass ahead would lie something new, something inexperienced as yet—what, she knew not, but somehow she felt that in the end it would be good. And so came up abreast of John Marlowe, a tall, strong figure in the grey light of dawn, rolled balaclava cap well down over his ears and his rather square-cut face framed by a khaki woollen muffler, as he leant on his ice-axe, watching her. Behind him, Akbar Khan, one time sapper in John's field company, now a minor pillar of the Survey of India, rejoicing in three havildar's stripes and some unfamiliar title, stood with the coiled rope over his shoulders—the straw-hued red-stranded rope that has such a history of men and mountains. John was cautious in such matters, and a rope and an ice-axe are good company in most mountain places, even though a benign Government may have constructed a graded pony road for summer use.

“Short-cut—as usual—Miss Seymour,” he remarked, as she clambered on to the path. “You never seem to miss them, somehow.”

“I hate sticking to the road if a short-cut is possi-

ble," she panted as she stood on the path breathing fast. "And besides, I want to get on to the pass and not crawl up behind the ponies."

"You're wise," said he, turning to lead on up the road. "I detest being stuck behind the transport. Where are the others?"

"Somewhere at the back; Mary's riding, and I think Jim is with her."

"I'd sooner walk than ride on a road like this. There's a nasty drop or two farther on, and a hired pony is not like a mount one knows. Hulloo! Listen!"

Alison involuntarily stiffened at the tone of the voice, and in the half-second's silence that followed as she watched John Marlowe's tense eyes striving to peer up through the shifting veil of mist and rain, she became suddenly aware of danger, aware somehow, through another's senses, of danger that she herself could not see. The next instant she was running in response to the curt command, "Stones, Miss Seymour!—run like hell!" and in her wake came the figures of John and Akbar Khan. Perhaps two seconds later they were crouching in the lee of a great rock overhanging the path, and behind, over the place where they had been standing, crashed stone after stone, volleying out into space again beyond the path, from pebbles the size of one's hand to little stones as big as a man's head.

Alison, breathless from the unwonted exertion of running uphill at an altitude where even walking as yet seemed fatiguing, crouched there listening to her heart thumping against her ribs until the noise of the falling stones had died away again, to be succeeded by the clamour of the ponymen behind, the first of whom had just come round the corner in time to perceive the last

of the stones disappearing over the edge of the path into the grey void below.

"Nasty things, stones," said John at last as he came out of cover and looked up the stone-strewn slope where there were no trees—always ominous in an otherwise tree-clothed hillside. "Must be a nuisance to be deaf in this sort of country. I think that's the end, but I'll tell the men to hurry across that bit. It's the only place on the Zoji that I've known stones fall."

The voice was quiet and unconcerned, and Alison felt reassured. She had been just the least bit shaken at first in the face of the unexpected. Snow avalanches she had visualised, but the thought of stones had not occurred to her.

Then as she followed John Marlowe on up the track she found herself looking at him with a new feeling. His quiet had impressed her—he was evidently one of those very fortunate people in whose composition fear has been left out. Caution was obviously there, but nothing else. And then it occurred to her that but for the fortunate chance of meeting him just at that corner she would probably still have been standing there when the stones came down, for the short-cut had tired her not a little, and only sheer pride had made her go on because some one else wanted to. Alone she would have waited there till the leading ponies arrived.

And to John, who was inwardly wondering, as he always did, whether this little escape was not a warning for him—just a hint that he might be ready for the next time, when there would be no escape—looked at Alison with something approaching admiration. It was not every woman who would have taken it as coolly, who would have understood at once what to do, who

would have realised the right place to run to almost before she was shown, or who would have refrained from long comments about it afterwards. Then because the morning was ominously grey and cloudy, with intervals of rain and sleet and now and again pure snow, he forgot about Alison, and, there being no work at the moment, his mind slid off into the past and towards the ideal.

But very shortly work claimed him when they reached the two great snow-slides that almost to the end of the summer remain across the road—where the rock-cut path ceases to be a path and becomes a narrow track across a very steep snow-slope stretching down to the river-bed, eight hundred to a thousand feet below. Late in the year it becomes a hard-beaten trail, but now it was a faintly marked track made for the first time this year on the previous day by a venturesome party of Yarkandis anxious to get up to Ladakh as early as possible. It was frozen hard still, and there were places that were none too safe, where a slipping pony might go on slipping, and the ponies had to be got across with men holding on to heads and tails, pushing and dragging, as the animals slipped and fell in their tracks.

It was not dangerous really—the slope was not steep enough for that—it was merely hard work and tiring; but it was novel to Alison, and it was certainly travel, and she remembered what she had been accustomed to call travel, what her friends at home called travel—luxurious motors from luxurious hotel to hotel, each a replica of the last. She smiled a little at the remembrance, and being unfamiliar as yet with the road, thought the passing of the Zoji a bigger matter than it really is, and felt perhaps a rather exaggerated ad-

miration for John and Jim and the other men who were shepherding the laden animals across these treacherous-looking snow-slides.

Then farther on there were real precipices—places where one looked over the edge of the rock-hewn path with the limestone wall shooting up high on the left, and she could calculate to a nicety the first point she would hit, some six hundred and more feet below, if she were foolish enough to step off the track, or if a frightened animal should swing round suddenly on the narrow path.

But most of all, it was the immense rock wall on the opposite side of the ravine that impressed her as the light grew stronger and the mist cleared from time to time—rock wall running up for a couple of thousand sheer feet to end in great expanses of snow overhanging the ravine below. Through these week after week during the winter the mail-runners with their little mailbags would force the pass, waiting their moment—little parties of three or four men, picking their way over the frozen snow after waiting perhaps three days at the mouth of the ravine listening to the roar of the great avalanches coming down.

And so at last she came to the top, and in company with John Marlowe reached Kain Pathri, where the ascent more or less ceases, and looked over long level snow-fields with, on either hand, dimly seen heights of white snow or sharp-cut black rock. She felt real elation now—her first pass climbed, and she looked ahead for the new world that should lie before her eyes, and was quite disappointed when John explained that there was about six miles yet to go before they would really enter the country beyond Kashmir.

Before her stretched one long whiteness, gentle

slopes and hollows, and on one side a little expanse of dark ground showed—in reality the roof of the dak-runners' hut, unoccupied during the winter months: perhaps as well, in view of the fact that an avalanche had swept over it and curled up beyond on to the farther slope. It had recently been cleared, and the broken roof showed sharp where the smoke-blackened rafters stood out against the white snow.

The ponies and men came straggling in, and at the tail were Jim and Mary and the mail overseer, a short-bearded figure in a balaclava cap. He was telling Jim about the mail-runners, and he spoke with the authority of one who had known the pass for twenty years.

"End of the first lap," said Jim, as he cast himself down upon the small dry patch of ground above the hut and pulled out a packet of chocolate. "Did you bump into the stones?"

"No, we ran," replied John. "Miss Seymour's getting her hill wind. Did you get any?"

"No, but the men in front saw them, and told us that your shattered bodies were reposing in the stream-bed below. Seeing your spirits still footing it on the farther side of the snow-slides, however, I told them they needn't worry about your corpses, but that anybody who didn't hustle would follow into the stream. With that inducement and my whip we kept the ponies moving, and here we are. For the third week in May the Zoji's the blooming limit."

"And I am going to have a skinless nose shortly," announced Mary, muffling that member still further in the folds of her woollen scarf.

"I told you to put burnt cork on your face before we started," said Jim. "You've no idea how nice

you'd look like that. You'll be sorry you didn't before the day's over if the sun comes out."

"There aint going to be no sun," announced John. "We're in for snow good and proper soon."

"It ain't goin' to ra-in no mor', no mor',
Oh, it ain't goin' to ra-in no mor',"

chanted Jim, in a series of discords. "We're going to descend to the flower-strewn plains and orchards of Matayan before very long. Alison hasn't seen the rustic beauty of that earthly paradise yet. We shan't be able to tear her away from it to-morrow. She'll want to buy three acres and a cow there."

"They haven't got a cow. Matayan consists of five million acres of grit and stones plus a perpetual gale," corrected John.

"Not true," croaked Mary from beneath her muffler. "The gale stops when it's snowing, and it's going to snow to-night all right. Me for the road again. There's a hot meal ready for Macchoi."

And with that she whipped up her pony once more and set out over the snow, the faithful Ghulam Hussain walking alongside, his naturally dark face jet-black against the powdered snow on his turban, the tail of which was wound round his throat, his snow-goggles protruding in front of his already slightly prominent eyes, giving him the look of a benevolent crab.

It took them two hours to make the Gumber defile—a sort of cross-roads where two great nullahs meet and a bleak, bare building rises out of the snow—the telegraph linesmen's hut—also empty. Behind them plodded an energetic Indian with three coolies and a large coil of rope. He was the Imperial Telegraph Department, and with his coil of rope and a grapnel

proposed to extricate the wrecked telegraph line from the depths of the big avalanche that formed a ridge across the valley ahead of Gumber.

Snow was still hard and going comparatively easy, and in the novelty of it all Alison felt no fatigue. The day seemed a little clearer and the snow had now stopped falling again, so that she was glad of the goggles Mary had made her bring, for even the grey light of a cloudy day was trying. She noticed John Marlowe was continually glancing from side to side as they passed the various valleys, but it wasn't until they reached the avalanche slope in front of Gumber that she understood the reason, and realised that it was from these quiet valleys curving up to either hand that danger might come. The great tumbled slope of snow had clearly swept down one of those valleys—its traces lay clear to view up the floor of the valley. And then again she felt the littleness of herself and her troubles—her smallness in face of those white silences.

Presently she observed a party of three men moving over the snow beyond, and wondered vaguely what they were doing. They moved slowly, and seemed to be looking for something they had lost.

"What are they looking for?" she asked John Marlowe.

"Probably for the men who were buried here last week," he replied, picking his way among the snow-cones of the avalanche slope. Then suddenly he stopped, and, turning to Akbar Khan, took his glasses from the case the man was carrying. A brief conversation followed, and she saw Akbar Khan take the glasses in turn. Then another few words in the Hindustani she could not follow, and Akbar Khan

moved off towards the party of men on the rise to the left.

"I think we've seen what they're looking for," said John quietly. "There's something black sticking up out of the snow over there. Looks to me like a man's arm, and Akbar Khan thinks the same, so I've sent him to fetch them over."

It proved to be a man's arm indeed, and Alison saw three men come over and set to work with their crude mattocks.

"His two brothers and his father," explained John, and a feeling of delicacy prevented Alison going any nearer. It didn't seem right somehow to intrude on their sorrow, and so they pursued their way onwards to Macchoi after John had told two of his men to go and help. The clouds closed down again, and when finally they made their way up the steep little incline to the rest-house of Macchoi, it was in the teeth of a heavy snowstorm that was to persist all day.

The ponymen, whose one idea now was to get out of the snow, refused to stop for food, and pushing on down the slopes ahead, were lost to view. The three Europeans crowded into one of the two cheerless rooms of the dark rest-house, and consumed hot food and coffee which Mary was heating on a Primus stove. Jim came in later than the others, having gone to look at the party digging in the snow.

"They got him out all right," he said. "Poor devil—had his neck broken. Funny thing your spotting him like that, John."

"Yes, queer, wasn't it?" assented John. "Today's snow would have covered him again. I expect he melted out a bit during those two days of sunshine."

But internally John was wondering why he had been

the one to spot him, and was thinking of Rider Haggard's book, *Allan Quatermain*, where Allan Quatermain and the Zulu alone of the party see the body of the man who had been drowned at the entrance to the tunnel leading to the rose of fire—the two whose own time is drawing near. And once again the terror of the mountains came over him as he sat there eating Mary's carefully prepared breakfast—outwardly talking unconcernedly of avalanches and stone shoots and other kindred subjects brought up by the morning's happenings.

"Macchoi is of all spots I know the most cheerless," remarked Jim Lenox, looking round dispassionately at the double-shuttered windows, the smoky wood fire lit in their honour, the faded and torn red curtains over the cracked windows, and the disreputable tape bed upon which he sat, the three battered chairs having already been appropriated before his arrival by the other three members of the party. The women were rather silent now—partly perhaps fatigue, partly probably the thought of that party behind.

But when they rose to go on again out into the driving snow that whirled about the gaunt building which had sheltered them for the last hour, they saw a little knot of men halting at the foot of the slope below them, by the broken end of the serai whose last two rooms had been carried away by an avalanche the previous winter. The knot of men stood silent about something dark and still lying upon the snow between them, one arm outstretched as though in protest or perhaps warning.

And Alison, being a Catholic, murmured a prayer for the soul of the dead man who had been so sud-

denly swept out of all he had known in his limited life.

"A Dard," she heard Jim say to John behind her, "from Pindras way. They're going to take him down there to bury him. Quite a nice-looking lad. . . ."

Then the necessity for picking her steps in the softening snow claimed her attention, and she heard no more. But she felt now that she was beginning to understand the road better—to comprehend that, like every other aspect of life, the road which could be so entrancing had also its tragic aspects, that the hills which could be so sweet could also be very terrible, and that the snow that could be so glorious might also be a winding-sheet.

Hour after hour they wound along in the steady snow-fall among dimly seen snow-slopes over a gentle descent, along the edge of a rushing torrent whose banks were hidden under high snow-walls, only recently broken free of its snowy fetters that for months had hidden the stream from view, and so at last came into a desolate plain whose only feature seemed an unending line of posts supporting a single telegraph wire that stretched on towards Leh and there ended—the last vestige of civilisation.

"Matayan at last," said Jim Lenox to her as he walked beside her pony—she was riding now. He pointed on into the white distance.

"Where?" queried Alison.

"That little bump in the snow," said Jim. "That's the rest-house. It's three times the height of anything else in the place. Two rooms and a kitchen. And you'll think it a palace to-night."

And palace indeed it seemed when an hour later Alison settled down in a broken chair before a roaring

fire in the room that she and Mary were sharing. There was shelter from the snow outside, there was warmth, and there would presently be food; while as soon as the animals were off-loaded there would be dry under-garments, unless the snow had melted through valises. Outside the snow came down steadily, and the tiny houses of Matayan, six feet high with four-foot doors, were blotted out under a blanket of white; while on either hand immense rock hills showed faintly through the falling white veil of snow where once she heard the long low rumble of an avalanche.

But there was no wind. As Mary had correctly said, the Matayan gale always drops when it begins to snow, and they went to bed in still silence. Tired as she was, Alison could not sleep at first—the flickering firelight threw all sorts of queer shadows on the walls, and her thoughts kept on revolving round the day's happenings. She found herself trying to understand life once again—to trace the guiding hand that directed the falling stones and the slipping snow, to grasp the why and wherefore—why she was warmly in bed in Matayan rest-house with what was really luxury of every sort, while the young Dard was a stiff and twisted corpse at Macchoi, waiting until the morning when his father and brothers would bring him back to the house he had left ten days before.

Then by degrees sleep claimed her, and consciousness slipped away as the shadows closed about her eyes.

Four feet away from her, separated by a rather badly constructed wall of mud and stones covered with stained plaster, John Marlowe lay with closed eyes listening to Jim's healthy snores. He also had been thinking of the Dard, and wondering again why he—John Marlowe—had seen him, and why also it had

seemed to him as they left Macchoi that the dead man's stiff arm had appeared to point his way. Then he laughed at himself for being a fool—thought of Ethel Carruthers—and went to sleep, to awake in the middle of the night watching the last dying flickers of the wood fire, with a mixed recollection of a dream wherein he had seen Ethel, who had called to him, but when he tried to reach her she turned into Alison Seymour, and her also he could not reach because something menacing stood between them; he thought it was a dead man, but he couldn't see properly.

Then, waking, he realised that he was cold, pulled his poshtin on to his bed, and slept like a log until noises in the room announced morning, with Jim whistling lugubriously as he poured out a cup of tea.

CHAPTER VII

ALEC CUNNINGHAM, LTD.

DARWEZA KHAN, ex-soldier—Khattack of Lachi in the Kohat district of the north-west frontier of India—sat at peace with the world in the long tent which served him as storeroom and workshop—incidentally also as bed- and dining-room, shared with Murteza Khan of his own village. It was really two smallish tents of a pattern particularly light for their size, which could be pitched together to form one long narrow shelter.

He was at work at the moment—a condition of affairs which might be described as perennial, since, except when asleep, he was never idle. He had discarded the khaki turban of small round Khattack pattern with which he adorned himself on the road, and over his well-oiled bobbed black locks was now only the skull-cap of the North West—the skull-cap with ear-pieces whose model goes back so far into the dim ages that men say it was designed from the helmets of Alexander's soldiers, where old Macedonian blood undoubtedly still runs in the veins of many a Khattack, and so perhaps accounts for their frequent beauty of mould.

The job in hand just then was the insertion of climbing-nails into his master's boots—new nails from England, great heavy clinkers and trikounis; and these latter, a new importation of Alec Cunningham's, had caused a pucker in Darweza Khan's brow above the

surma-painted eyes. It was the first time he had handled them, and he was not yet quite certain as to the best way of fixing them. He solved the problem quickly however—he had solved a few hundred other such in the years that he had followed Cunningham—and once the work had become mechanical, his mind roved over his morning's tasks. Outside the tent the sun rose ever higher over the spires and chartens of Lamayuru monastery on the Ladakh road above the pleasant willow garden surrounding Cunningham's tents, and even threw stray shafts into the great dark gorge beyond, where to-morrow they would drop down into the Indus valley where the Leh road swings right-handed up the river.

It had been distinctly a good morning. In his capacity of quartermaster, Darweza Khan had dealt firmly with the new cook, a Kashmiri, who had a mistaken idea as to the amount of flour that he might draw for each loaf he had to bake. Suavely but poignantly, Darweza had traced the cook's female pedigree through several generations, and finally issued approximately half the amount of flour the cook had been in the habit of obtaining from his last employer.

He had also talked—not unkindly—with a pig-tailed Ladakhi, who had brought chickens for sale. The chickens were fat and good, and at present reposed firmly secured by the leg to a tent-peg without. But neither their fatness nor goodness was any reason for expending extra annas of his master, and Darweza was punctilious in the matter. The Pathan has an involved and queer code of honour which no European will ever really understand, but which the Pathan will uphold with lead and steel *à outrance*, and on to this Darweza Khan had somehow grafted the idea that to

make, or to allow any one else to make, the tiniest personal profit out of the goods he purchased or handled for his master would be a stain on his own jealously guarded honour.

The farther half of the tent was piled high with boxes and sacks and bales—months of supplies. There were also ice-axes, ropes, survey instruments, guns, and other impedimenta—all in Darweza's charge—and though he knew not a single letter of his own nor any other alphabet, he had a remarkably accurate idea of the quantity of each and every article for which he was responsible.

By his side, next to his little tool-chest, reposed another pair of boots—Murteza Khan's—awaiting repairs; in front of him was a newly constructed portable meat-safe, which he occasionally surveyed with pardonable pride; outside on the grass lay the outer fly of a shelter tent which he intended repairing later in the day; while on the fly lay the large Airedale, Boris, looking unwontedly well-groomed. Bathing the dogs was a side-line of Darweza's, as was also his practice of preparing their food daily, for he had entirely emancipated himself from the stupid Indian idea that the looking after dogs is the business of that humble relic of a submerged Dravidian race—the sweeper.

The two Khattacks and the two dogs understood each other thoroughly. They were entirely united by two things in particular, the first being their extreme devotion to the man who paid for their food, the second their complete and utter contempt for all Kashmiris, Ladakhis, and most Southern or Eastern Indians and such-like peoples—for anybody, in fact, whom they considered either would not or could not fight.

The last of the trikounis duly inserted, Darweza rose up and sallied out of the tent to look over the camp. He surveyed it with a judicial eye, and it seemed that all was in order. Murteza Khan, with the help of the cook's assistant, a burly, bearded Kashmiri, was washing clothes, some of which floated gaily in the breeze from a long rope. Cunningham's bedding was being duly sunned in company with the dogs' coats, which they wore on cold nights; the cook was busy making up his oven for baking, it being a halt-day, and the wood ordered that morning had duly materialised. All things considered, and bearing in mind the fact that they were handicapped by a new cook, the old one having fallen ill in Srinagar, all was going well. Darweza, therefore, gathered up some of Cunningham's socks which required darning, and returned to the tent to set himself to preparing his and Murteza Khan's breakfast, it being now close on eleven o'clock. Not for the world would he have allowed the Kashmiris to make his chupattis or to boil such vegetables as they had—*imprimis*, to Darweza they were by virtue of their nationality thieves; secondly, in his estimation they were unspeakably dirty.

In the large tent a little way off Cunningham as usual was working. Was it not a day of halt and rest? Like Darweza, Cunningham was a man of many sidelines, and when not actually engaged in exploring or mapping mountains or glaciers, he had a score of other jobs to which to turn his busy mind. At the moment he was engaged on a series of notes on lamaistic paintings—endeavouring to trace the connection between the wall frescoes common to lamaist *gompas* and the sources whence they had sprung—to find if might be the reason why what purported to be Buddhist monas-

teries should be adorned—or according to the perhaps limited minds of many people who saw them, disfigured—by pictures seemingly more appropriate to Tantric Hinduism.

The subject was not his main business, but even so there were very erudite professors in universities scattered over Europe who looked forward with impatience to the arrival of the envelopes addressed in the square, determined handwriting of Alec Cunningham, and who sent him long letters in several languages seeking his opinion on this or that, or asking him to get them examples of the written scripts of languages so dead that the world at large no longer knows their very names.

It was all work, of course, but it filled up the days for the man who for so long had made his life out of work. In ceasing to work he might remember—or worse still, forget—too much. And the work chosen had been chosen very deliberately, as work that should take him away from the softer parts of the world. Just as John Marlowe had the fear of mountains upon him, so had Alec Cunningham the fear of civilisation—the fear that the softer, easier roads would destroy that side of his character which had been so much to the woman he loved. All of us are composite beings, and Alec Cunningham always considered that he was a company of about four different people, and that only one of them was worth anything at all. The first two were utterly objectionable, the third only passable, but the fourth under proper discipline might possibly turn into a man. And over thirty years before the woman had shown him clearly what she thought. Furthermore, she had loved that fourth aspect of him, and therefore Alec Cunningham, to whom happiness meant

one thing, and one thing only—the love and presence of her whom he had called “Princess of Dreams”—how Mrs. Dashwood would have laughed at the idea of Alec Cunningham and a dream princess!—had put his foot on the necks of the first two beings that made up half his personality, and done his level best to keep it there through the years that followed. They were extraordinarily tenacious of life, of course; they bobbed up and grinned at him, led generally by the first—the decadent remains of a banker possibly of Yiddish extraction, with a craving for riches, comfort, and safety, but specially safety. The second was an unpleasing person, who also said he was Alec Cunningham and who clamoured for wine and women, but more particularly women—many of them. The third partner in Alec Cunningham, Ltd., was even in Alec’s opinion preferable to the two first—he had probably been a mercer in the time of Edward III. and would have made a model citizen at the present age. The fourth was merely a knight-errant mislaid a few centuries, an impracticable personage who was always aiming at the *beau geste*. Him the composite Alec Cunningham endeavoured to keep in the forefront, feeling all the time exactly like one of the Lamaist images he was studying at this very moment—something with several heads all quite different and looking different ways. The mercer of Edward III., however, supplied a goodly leaven to the knight-errant, and as a result Alec Cunningham had never lost a man and rarely an animal in any of his expeditions. The mercer had probably carried a sword with scabbard marked in inches for measuring Brussels velvet, but had been quite ready to draw the sword if need be, and sometimes Alec felt that he hadn’t always been fair to that partner in this business

known as "Alec Cunningham, Ltd." But concerning the first two he had no doubts whatever. Complete extinction was the prescription, only unfortunately you cannot pay a hundred guineas to a Harley Street gentleman for excising half your personality.

So, as I have said, they continued to wriggle unpleasantly and to demand what was not in the least suited to or good for the whole company, and the easier life was, the more they wriggled and the more they upset the knight-errant and, to a lesser degree, the honest mercer. There had been times when they had completely obscured the former and very nearly the latter. And since such times were always in places or company where the scent of flesh-pots was strong, Alec Cunningham avoided these localities and societies.

In actual fact the second partner was probably a forgotten Latin whose blood had at some time been mingled with that of Alec's forebears—with the Latin taste for life, of course, but also with the Latin judgment which enabled Alec Cunningham to look at himself dispassionately, and for this last he ought to have been grateful instead of merely telling the Latin that he was a nasty-minded person. But Alec had not got so far in introspection as that, and he merely hated the Latin with a capacity obviously inherited from that same Latin. The average pure-blooded Englishman doesn't know how to hate, any more than he knows how to dissect his personality.

But one thing Alec had discovered, and that was that the Latin partner disliked work and the possibly Hebraic banker loathed danger. Provided that there was a sufficiency of both, the pair of them became so completely anaesthetised, so much so that he sometimes didn't see them for months at a time. The mercer

liked work and didn't mind danger so long as it had a reason. The knight-errant didn't mind work—he preferred epic poetry, of course, but he loved danger more particularly if there was no very definite reason other than the romantic for seeking it.

Presumably there was also a fifth Alec Cunningham, essence of the whole, who directed the outfit. Some people—Alison Seymour, for instance—would have called it his soul. And that portion of him, sitting in judgment ever so many years ago, had voted for the Central Asian mountains and glaciers, and there the party had been more or less ever since. For the great glaciers of the Karakorum and of Central Asia generally will provide you with all the danger and all the work that any knight-errant or honest English mercer could ever want. And since they produce neither money nor women, it was to be hoped that in the fulness of time the banker and the Latin would die of inanition.

Thus had reasoned Alec Cunningham the fifth and from thence onward predominant partner, and, on the whole, he had reasoned correctly. His only mistake was in assuming the question of death. The annoying partners did not die—they merely slept, and when they woke up were as lively as ever; but that at least was a respite, and Alec Cunningham hoped very sincerely that when he died and so came over the top of the highest pass of all, he would find the company resolved into something simpler—mostly knight-errant, with a touch of the methodical honest mercer to keep the balance. That was the aspect she had loved, and that must surely, therefore, be the final aspect, since she would be waiting for him there, and on the snows of that farther slope leading down to the gardens of all happi-

ness there can no more be any such thing as disillusionment.

Since for the present, on the high road to Ladakh, with rest-houses at every stage and companies of American cinematographers, tourists, subalterns in search of big game, and so forth to be seen almost daily, there was no danger in view, he worked; and since he couldn't work at glaciers, he worked at archaeology, history, ethnology, folklore—anything and everything that had the least remote connection with the fringes of the region which he had come to regard as his own.

And therefore on the day that John Marlowe, the Lenox', and Alison were making their last long march into Leh, you see Alec Cunningham sitting in his tent at Lamayuru, working. He was in no great hurry to get to Leh; he had plenty of work on hand, and he did not mean to cross the passes till later in the year, while in any case he intended descending the Indus two or three marches to investigate some Dard remains. But he could always find time, as he did that morning, to go out for a few minutes and have a word with the men, more particularly with Darweza and Murteza Khan—talk light-heartedly a while with them in their own beloved pashtu—to talk with them of their village and of crops and gardens as though there was no such thing as glaciers and Lamaism in all the world.

Just as he was returning to his tent he saw a mounted man coming up the steep track from the Wanla Chu defile—a man in plum-coloured robe, plum-coloured leather pubbos over the long white felt stockings, and small red fez. The miscellaneous assortment of Ladakhi clothes and Yarkandi footwear bespoke the man of Leh; the fez told you he was a Mussalman.

Cunningham recognised Aziz Muhammad—an arg-hoon of Leh who had been with him previously as caravan bashi and whom he had engaged for this trip again, picking him up at Kargil.

There was little of the Ladakhi about Aziz Muhammad; his features were almost Indian, only the skin was paler. He swung himself off his horse at sight of Cunningham, and came forward with the bundle of letters which he had been sent to fetch from the post-office at Khalatse six miles farther on—the only post-office for the best part of a hundred miles.

Cunningham watched him lead away the horse—a grey Yarkandi, one of four ponies Aziz had bought for him in Leh, with a gaudy high-pommelled saddle of red leather, and bridle and trappings set with quaint little worked plates of silver. Cunningham's gear was mostly of the very quiet order, but he had told Aziz to buy saddles as well, and this had been the result. Cunningham smiled at the thought of what his friends would say if they could see him on the road on that saddle.

Then he turned into the tent with the letters. There was a large batch from Europe, with the stamps of half a dozen countries and the postmarks of as many famous university towns, and three letters with Indian stamps. The former he put aside to deal with later; they would require careful answering—probably entail his sitting up late that night and several nights after. The ones with Indian stamps on he opened first—a bill he had forgotten, a letter from a friend in the Survey at Simla giving him some information he had asked for, and one in John Marlowe's handwriting—this last postmarked "Khalatse."

John Marlowe wrote occasionally, and it was one of the real pleasures of Alec Cunningham's life to get these letters, for he looked upon John Marlowe somewhat as a son. John's father had been at school with him—had begun life in the same regiment and been Alec Cunningham's closest friend during the few years in the Army before Alec had given up that profession to devote himself to exploring.

Cunningham was a man in whom the passion for paternity was strong, although he had never married, and when Charles Marlowe had died fairly young, leaving his widow only the exiguous pension of his rank, it was Alec Cunningham who had paid for the greater part of the boy's education. And it was a great return to him to find the boy developing more and more along the lines that he would have liked a son of his to choose.

As a boy, John—fatherless and with only one uncle—had always looked forward to the rare visits of the tall, sunburned man who could tell such fascinating yarns of travel in wild places, who talked familiarly of mountains and deserts and rivers that John had only seen as vague names on the maps that were the greatest pleasure of his studies—who spoke of yaks and such-like creatures as other men speak of cows or chickens—animals of everyday life.

And then later on, when his boyish passion for geography had developed into something more, Cunningham had introduced him into the circles where men's hobby is the world—it was Cunningham who had proposed him for the Royal Geographical Society—and through Cunningham the young, rather reserved Sapper Lieutenant had talked with men whose names

are known and honoured through half the civilised world—the men who have spent their lives filling up the blank gaps in the maps of our schooldays.

Cunningham liked to think that some day when he was gone, or if luck should fail and illness or age put a stop to his work, that John would carry it on. Nobody would have believed that Cunningham had celebrated his sixtieth birthday; most people put him down as a well-preserved fifty, and young at that, from the way he walked and climbed. Incessant and unremitting work instead of ageing him seemed to have preserved his youth, and when sometimes he had taken the younger generation for a stroll up one of the Kashmir mountains—an honour he reserved for those whom he thought might be thereby fired to greater things—it was the younger generation that tired first. Even John Marlowe, harder than most men, found he had his work cut out to keep level with Alec Cunningham on a stiff hillside.

John's letter was largely technical—dealing with questions of maps and mountains and glaciers—but among these he had also inserted some details of the journey up; and in the case of John, and of John alone, perhaps Alec found these more absorbing than the really interesting points of work which John touched upon.

He described the party he was travelling with—all strangers to Cunningham—but nevertheless the name of one of them caused Alec to pause in his reading: caused him to pause and put down the letter for a moment as he wondered, wondered. Seymour is a fairly common name after all, and Cunningham put aside the memories it evoked, forced his well-trained

mind back to the present again, and went on with the letter.

Nevertheless the idea persisted subconsciously that this Miss Seymour might somehow be linked with the past, that it might be some one he knew of but had never met. And if so, well, life looked like being strangely interesting, for he would be two or three months in Ladakh, and Europeans are few and far between in that quaint corner of the world, so that a meeting—nay, many meetings—would be inevitable.

And on the morrow as he swung down the narrow ravine from Lamayuru—on foot, as was always his habit at the commencement of the day's march—he reflected again. It was cold in that great ravine, whose thousand-foot walls cut off the sunlight till late in the day; and it was lifeless that morning—no string of laden ponies or donkeys splashed their way through the stream whose course formed the road for the best part of three miles before one began to follow a slightly higher track, a four-foot ledge above the rushing torrent, now further swollen by the waters of the Wanla Chu which swept down in a swirl of silver snow water from a similar great defile of almost jade-coloured marble cliffs on the right.

The coldness and the loneliness may have been the reason for Cunningham's silence as he walked; usually he talked to the men—marches were his time for brushing up or learning the various tongues he had picked up in the course of his many wanderings. But both dogs and men remarked the fact, and the dogs periodically kept dashing back to him and jumping up as though asking him to take an interest in the morning. There was no doubt about it that morning—Alec Cun-

ningham was thinking and thinking deeply; and although neither the dogs in front nor Murteza Khan and Aziz Muhammad behind knew it, the reason of his thinking was the very commonplace fact that John Marlowe had spoken of a lady called Seymour.

CHAPTER VIII

LEH

TWO o'clock of the same morning, rather more than forty miles farther along the Leh road, saw Alison Seymour, dressed and ready for the day's march, emerging from the Nimu rest-house into the glory of a moonlit night. The last march from Nimu into Leh is longish, lying for the most part over a sandy plain devoid of any vegetation, where the only thing that breaks the monotony of the route is the occasional sight of mouldering chortens—the stone and mud obelisks, built generally to serve as receptacles for the pork-pie-like little moulds of ashes and mud which are the remains of the Ladakhi dead. Sometimes into the mould is also inserted a grain or two of barley to serve as food for the departed man or woman's spirit.

Still more rarely the road dips suddenly into a ravine, and in place of the glaring waste of sand, gravel, and stones, you find yourself for a few minutes in a cooler, greener spot with a little torrent of snow water or glacier water sweeping down from some rift in the hills, and all about you the green of stunted bushes and perhaps a few dwarf willows or poplars. But on the whole, the road from Nimu is the Leh road at its very worst, and therefore the Lenox party had decided to march by night—rather an innovation.

Alison was the first out that morning, for to her it was a completely new sensation to be taking the road by the light of a waning moon, which painted all the

poplars about her in the garden a vivid silver and threw soft lights on to the hills behind the rest-house—silvery hills slashed with the dark shadows of ravines. It was an unreal atmosphere, dream-like somehow; everything was clear and yet soft and formless, the poplars melted into the moonlight and the hills merged into the silvered sky, while all the night seemed full of a magic calm that soothed her. Nothing here seemed concrete; there were no sharp contrasts, no hard lines—everything seemed liquid—liquid shadows and liquid lights, and the faint soft breeze stirring the poplars took away any definiteness of outline, even from the nearest trees.

It was such a change from the vivid colouring of the day before—the intense blue of the sky, the glaring white and yellow of the sandy plain they had traversed after leaving Basgu with its hill-perched castles, all in ruins, its white chortens and long mǎné wall, its red and chocolate cliffs forming a background for one of the most picturesque of villages on the Ladakh road.

Alison had come to love that road with its long stretches of solitude or quasi-solitude, where the only life you met was an occasional group of pig-tailed Ladakhis driving their dzos and donkeys, or perhaps a woman or two with great astrakhan ear-flaps protruding either side of the turquoise-and-silver-studded red cloth snake forming the head-dress above the black hair, twisted into a multitude of plaits that lose themselves under the goatskin capes.

A laughing, cheerful folk who, although she could not speak with them, pleased her greatly; they were simple and hard-working, their pleasures few and far between, their hardships—as the West counts hardships—many. They seemed to her to breathe something of

the atmosphere of this country, where life had so few complications as compared with the life she had known, and her little tent which she had thought so simple at first now seemed a palace of luxury compared with the fashion in which these folk lived on the road—sleeping in the shelter of the bales of merchandise they transported for a living, the bales of goods that travel over a thousand miles and more between the railway at Pindi and the first towns of Central Asia on donkeys and dzos and ponies and yaks, a dozen miles or so a day.

And when she consumed Mary Lenox' excellent roadside lunches or "brunches," she thought sometimes how luxurious it all was in comparison with the mode of life of the Ladakhis whom she watched making their midday repast off a handful of barley meal rolled into little balls moistened with the tea or chang in the tiny wooden bowl each carried in the bosom of his voluminous and generally tattered and always dirty robe.

But the road was doing its work in helping her to find peace of mind. The long hours of marching gave time for thought and reflection, for they were a go-as-you-please party. Somebody fixed a rendezvous for the midday meal, and that was all. Those who got there first waited for the others, so that if Alison felt conversationally inclined she could attach herself to any one else who evinced a similar disposition. Otherwise she could travel alone and think.

She was just beginning to learn the scale of the country, too, and that was soothing. No longer, when she saw a village or a clump of verdure that looked as if one could almost touch it, did she imagine that five minutes would see her in the shade. She had learnt that it was probably a hot hour's march away. And

hills looking as if a quarter of an hour's brisk walk would land you at the top she had come to understand were mountains that would take you from dawn to sunset to climb and descend. To a person of Alison's mentality all that has a soothing effect in making one realise what a very tiny atom in the universe one really is. A crowd has nowise the same effect; you may strive against a crowd physically and mentally, but you cannot strive against space that seems infinite, nor against mountains; in the shadows of any of the smallest of the millions of rocks littering their giant sides, you are lost to view in an instant.

And so she had come to take life more placidly—the shadow of fear had faded into the background for the moment, and the day was sufficient for the day; the road in the freshness of the dawn and the pleasant wayside halts were one long joy, while even the hotter hours in the sunlight were rendered attractive by the wonderful colours the sun painted into the hills around.

Then turning towards the rest-house, she became aware of moving shadows—loose-gowned men busy roping loads on to ponies, men with odd-shaped caps whose flaps stuck out at the sides of their pig-tailed heads making them look like gnomes in the moonlight. A streak of crude yellow light from the open door showed where Jim Lenox—frequently the last to rise—was probably finishing his chota-hazri, and she came back out of the formless moonlight to the hard facts of life as shown up by a couple of hurricane lamps—a bare whitewashed room with two tape beds, some rather second-hand red curtains, some ancient camp chairs, and two rickety wooden tables.

“Last lap,” said Jim, as Alison entered. “The flesh-pots of civilisation before midday—the crowded streets

of Leh; shops—think of it, Alison, places where you can buy things and spend money. William Whiteley, and all the rest of them—doubtless Mappin and Webb and the Army and Navy Stores. Houses that people live in. Have you grasped the magnitude of what we are going to meet to-day after hundreds of miles of R-O-A-D? I have just composed my daily sonnet:

Shops, shops, be-autiful shops,
Full of matches and ghi and wops,
Smelly and smoky and small may be,
But places where money will change to tea.

Second line is rather Browningsque until you remember that the poetic form of 'wopses' is 'wops.' After that it's easy. Mark the depth of feeling in the last line. Conjures up the whole tragedy of the wife who forgot to pack enough tea into the store yakhdans **when** leaving Srinagar, and ever since has been telling lies daily about the importance of drinking cocoa and coffee when on the march. You can picture her stealing furtively out into the darkness grasping the rupees hidden in her skirts—I mean breeches—in the hope of finding a wandering merchant with a few bricks of Lhasa tea. You can imagine her wiping the sweat from her female brow as she plods on on her pony under the broiling sun towards the next halting-place, while the rest of the party sleep away the day in the shade of a mǎné wall, trusting that she will find some one at the next rest-house who's eaten out of jam and will trade tea for anything sweet. What a wonderful thing is genius! Think of getting all that into one line of verse!"

"Shut up, Jim, and finish your cocoa. It's time we were moving," said Mary severely.

"You see—the lure of the shops—'I he-ar you ca-a-a-a-lling me' sort of feeling. Think what blessing will descend upon Mr. Lipton's head tonight. I expect there will be butter lamps borrowed from the local monastery burning before the tin of green or yellow label adorned with telephoto view of beauteous Cingalese idly picking the fragrant herb. Anyway, the cocoa is finished, thank God, so I can't have another cup. I shall now lead the advance upon Leh armed with a riding-whip and two dogs."

"*Quem deus vult, etc.*," quoted Mary, speeding his departure. "Ah me, I fear I shall be a widow very young. He is surely madder every morning. Observe he has left his tobacco-pouch behind." She gathered up the article and followed Jim out into the moonlight, and Alison went with her.

Outside the ponies were waiting saddled, for no one had offered to walk this morning. It was reported by John to be the worst stage on the road, and Leh was ahead, while the household staff no longer needed the shepherding of the early days of the road. It could be trusted to arrive intact with baggage.

Following a walled track that did duty also as an irrigation channel among chortens and mǎnés ghostly in the moonlight, the four of them splashed their way out through the little low-walled fields into the open once more, with rising in front of them low hills through which their way wound upwards in a narrow gorge, and once more Alison had that feeling of unreality as they pushed on into the formless shadows of the hills—she and Mary riding together, the men in front, the two terriers little white blurs that continually appeared and disappeared.

Full dawn saw them descending towards the Indus

again, where it meanders in slow curves about Spitok, and presently Jim called a halt. They dismounted in the morning freshness on a little stretch of turf fringing the river, where Mary unpacked a very pleasant breakfast from the big saddle-bags on Jim's pony.

Eastward the sun was lifting over the hills beyond the isolated rock crowned with the black silhouette of Spitok monastery—chiefest hold in Ladakh of the Gelugpa, the yellow-cap order of Lamaist monks,—and faint and far-off they could hear the bray of the six-foot trumpets as the Lamas saluted the coming day. To southward a twenty-thousand-foot snow-cone swung aloft above the blue shadows of the lower hills, a snow pinnacle flaming gold against the cloudless blue; and all about them, in vivid contrast to the naked rock hills on their left, showed little green willows, stretches of fresh grass and growth of water plants in the slower channels bordering the main stream.

"Mount Sacrifice," said John to Alison, pointing to the great cone. "Isn't it a grand peak?" He was unpacking a small Primus stove as he spoke—his daily task since Jim had decreed that the working of all such fiendish inventions must obviously be the part of a sapper. "I don't think it's been climbed yet, and of course the local people say it never will be since it's the home of the gods. They always say that everywhere, of course, either of gods or fairies, or perhaps devils."

"It's a quaint name," replied Alison, looking at the great peak. "Who gave it that title?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think it was one of the missionaries at Leh who called it that during the war." And then he was silent, suddenly remembering Mary's quotation at the cinema, and her talk of the value of sacrifice. Only he didn't quote it to Alison,

for much as he liked her he didn't feel he knew her well enough yet awhile to talk of things as deep as that.

The methyated spirit had nearly burnt out of the Primus, and John began to pump—rewarded by the faint smoke that presages success in the operation. He struck a match, and the little stove roared in answer.

"A good day ahead—the omen is favourable," said Jim, watching lazily. He always maintained that the preparation of food had nothing to do with him—his business was the paying therefor and the eating thereof. "The voice of the Primus is heard in the land at the first match. All is well with the future. Let us now meditate on sausages."

They meditated actively on sausages duly cooked up with the potatoes boiled the previous evening, and thereafter turned their attention to large quantities of bread and jam, for the morning was fresh though the day promised to be hot, and thirteen miles or so lay behind them—excuse enough for a meal.

And then once more to the road—to the long sandy stone-strewn fan sloping up from Spitok's 11,000 feet to Leh at 11,500. Leh was clear to see as they rode, for all that it was still four miles off—cliff-perched palace and hill-top monastery with its giant image of the Buddha to come, Maitreya seated in European fashion instead of the more usual cross-legged pose. And behind the green splash of Leh rose again hills, a long sweep of snow-clad hills.

"The Khardong pass," said John, pointing to a slight depression in the long line of snow. "That's where one goes over into the Nubra and so to the Karakorum."

There was a light in his eyes as he spoke, and he pointed to the pass as a sailor homeward bound might

point out the first far gleam of a home lighthouse. And somehow Alison felt an answering call in her heart—the call of the wanderer to the wanderer, and she knew then that surely some day she too would climb up that long snow slope and over under those rocks that must be very giants for all that from here they were mere little black dots on a vast expanse of white under a sky of infinite blue.

“The long road to Central Asia,” she replied at last, and though she had never seen it she felt that somehow she knew it. Another than Alison would have talked about her previous life—felt certain that in some previous earthly existence she had trodden this fascinating road—that dim memories accounted for the sense of familiarity; but Alison had no such idea—the belief in previous existences was to her untenable, for without the memory of them they ceased to have any value. Previous lives that you could remember, and so profit by, would be sensible, but previous lives entirely locked away must be valueless to progress. And since in Alison’s conception of the universe everything must serve a purpose, she ruled out previous lives. The sense of familiarity was there, but it must be some inherited memory from some forgotten ancestor.

“The long road to Central Asia—yes, and to far Cathay,” repeated John, and tone and eyes were dreamy as he said it. Alison looked more closely at him, for she had never heard him speak in quite that way before. It stimulated her interest in him, for those few words and the way they were spoken seemed to reveal an aspect of the man very different from the more familiar one of a very matter-of-fact engineer officer,

whose life seemed to be made up chiefly of work and sport with perhaps occasional intervals of thought.

And then a little later in the hot morning sunlight they rode into the big gate at the entrance of the long enclosed bazaar—into what Jim Lenox called the world of civilisation—and she looked for Mappin and Webb and found them, and laughingly showed them to Jim.

“The Goldsmiths and Silversmiths,” she said, as she pointed out a tiny booth perhaps seven feet square, where a man in a Chinese cap was mending a watch. His stock-in-trade consisted of a few cheap silver ornaments, an American alarm-clock of which the seconds dial consisted of a negro’s head whose eyeballs rolled from left to right and back again to mark the passage of the second. A few tawdry Buddhist spoons, obviously for sale to ignorant tourists, completed the shop.

“And William Whiteley opposite,” replied Jim, indicating a booth perhaps ten feet by eight wherein were heaped baskets of grain and packets of sulphur matches, cheap Indian cigarettes, and a few hurricane lamps. “Didn’t I tell you there were shops in Leh? Look, there’s one with two bales of cotton cloth. I believe you can get your boots mended here too. Remember, it’s the capital of a country as big as England.”

Thus laughing, they rode through a series of little narrow lanes into the quiet of the tiny European quarter with its half-dozen houses, and ran into the doctor just mounting his pony with the idea of riding out towards Spitok to meet them. And then his wife hurried out and gathered up Mary and Alison.

For the moment they were to camp in the Residency garden, since the doctor and his wife were not leaving

for another three days, and the little house could not accommodate them all. John Marlowe was camping, anyway. But their first meal must of course be in the house—Leh hospitality is of the open-house variety, the sole credential required being a white face and the possession of some European language. In the whirl of talk that followed, Alison gleaned but little; there were unfamiliar names and words interlarded, but she left the house with the feeling that peace dwelt in Leh—that somehow this quaint rabbit-warren of a town under the real high mountains had in it the germs of peace of mind, and that these germs blossomed in the souls of the few white people who dwelt there. In exchange for their bare bread and butter, these same folk spent their lives doctoring the bodies of the Ladakhis, and endeavouring to doctor their souls, because they believed very firmly in the teachings of Someone whom it is the modern fashion to refer to as a “Great Initiate,” comparing Him with Gautama and Muhammad—Someone who had walked the roads of Palestine nineteen hundred years ago, healing sick bodies and souls, Someone who to Alison was the very Maker of the mountains and in Whom she believed with all her heart and soul.

And when her tent was pitched under the pleasant trees on the great grass expanse of the Residency garden and she looked out under the branches to the great cone of Mount Sacrifice, she felt that the peak was well named—this salient feature of the landscape opposite Leh. The records of the Moravian Mission must have spelt many sacrifices to the men and women who had laboured there, and of whom some now slept in the little cemetery belonging to the Mission.

But she felt also that they had somehow bought

peace—peace which in the end is always the reward of sacrifice—the peace that passeth all understanding. And as she arranged her little tent she prayed that that same peace might descend upon her too, that she might quit Leh in the end and return to life as it was meant for her, the stronger for this sojourn in Ladakh—in the country that she had heard spoken of as a land of dreams, but which also seemed in certain ways a land of intense striving and endeavour, of hard roads and of great sacrifices.

Then Jim called to her to come out and admire the wonderful green wooden horse whereon some previous assistant resident—the political officer who comes up from Srinagar for the summer months to act as British Joint Commissioner of the Central Asian trade-route—had spent his leisure hours trying to increase his polo handicap. They laughed together over “Verdant—out of Wood, by Carpenter,” and then laughed still more over the wonderful life-sized paintings of red-clothed chuprassis painted in the most wooden Indian style on the white plaster at either side of the entrance door of the house.

A little way away John’s tents were pitched, and she could see him busy with his men unpacking cases of instruments to see if they had sustained any damage during the long voyage up. He intended to begin his work from Leh itself, and would be there for the next three weeks at least.

Then presently she and Mary were carried off again by the doctor’s wife to make the acquaintance of the other lady of Leh, wife of one of the missionaries, and once again Alison had the same impression as she had gathered at the doctor’s—the impression of peace—peace where most of the world would find only boredom

and discomfort—four hundred and fifty miles from the nearest railway—two hundred and fifty miles from the nearest road permitting of any form of wheeled traffic—at an altitude that gave no chance to the really sick, and where for six months out of the year the pony-road which linked them with civilisation was closed by a snow-bound pass.

And thus at the end of a long day Alison went to bed in her tent after watching the snows of Mount Sacrifice fade from rose to white and white to faint blue until it was only a dim blur on the star-gemmed horizon—a blur that held, nevertheless, the promise of a golden dawn. She fell asleep with the thought of peace in her heart, but somehow there persisted the vision of Mount Sacrifice and all the thoughts it had evoked, and she knew then that the road was not yet ended, that there were more passes in front, and that this was only a respite—a pleasant halting-place on the road of life, like the many she had rested in on the way up to Leh.

CHAPTER IX

SPITOK

“**S**PITOK is a yellow-cap monastery, which, being interpreted, means it belongs to a sort of reformed church founded by a gent of the name of Tsong Kapa, who appears to have lived a trifle later than Henry VIII., from whom possibly he cribbed his ideas of monastic reform. The chief one seems to have been the provision of caps yellow for the lamas instead of the more usual red ones. Apparently he tried to put them altogether in yellow, but the people jibbed, although Tsong Kapa explained that it was the original colouring adopted by Buddha. I’m full of knowledge this morning, having sat up late last night with some books borrowed from the Mission library.”

Jim Lenox looked round the chota-hazri table to see if any one would venture to dispute his claim, but Mary and Alison, fully occupied with their eggs, made no effort to dispute his supremacy in the matter of knowledge of Lamaism, so he continued:

“It’s quite about the best line in yellow monasteries in Ladakh, although the Skushok won’t be there, I’m afraid.”

“What exactly is a shushok?” queried Alison.

“Skushok,” corrected Mary. “Skushok or abbot. Jim will supply further details.”

“Skushoks are reincarnations of other skushoks, who in turn were reincarnations of still other skushoks, *ad infinitum*. Chief point about a skushok is that he

mustn't have been born until at least nine or ten months after the death of the previous one. He is known by various marks—size of ears, shape of head, length of feet, and so on. They have a baby parade of possible runners, and hand 'em out the deceased's clothing, toys, regalia, etc. Then when the watching lamas see the light of recognition leap up in the baby's eyes at the sight of the still missing braces button on the second best pants, or skushokian equivalent, they know they've spotted the reincarnation for a cert. Thereafter they return it to its earthly mother to milk, wash, and so on for a few years—under supervision, of course—and later on hand it over to some notable skushok to educate. You see the reincarnation has to pretend to have forgotten all it used to know—how to sign its name, which is always the same, how to blow its nose, etc., etc. Seems to me waste of a lot of lives having to relearn that sort of thing continually."

"Can't you ever be serious, Jim?" asked Mary.

"Never in the early morning, my dear. But to speak in sober seriousness—am I ever other than earnest, Alison, or hast ever seen me gay with wine?—wise woman, she merely removes the egg from her face and refrains from prevaricating. To continue, speaking in earnest, the spirit of the Skushok after death passes into a new babe, and that's the catch—spotting the babe. And the lamas may have to wait for years before the great man condescends to come back to earth again. But he seems safe, for once a skushok always a skushok. No chance of turning up as a cow or a little lizard with a wiggly tail like you or I might if we hadn't been good."

"I wish we were going to see the Shu-Skushok," said Alison. "He's only a babe of about seven, Mrs. Skin-

ner told me. It would be rather fun to see him on his throne among the aged lamas."

"He's reabsorbing earthly knowledge in the Nubra valley at present. John will probably see him," said Mary.

"Who's taking my name in vain?" came John's voice from the door. "I like this—you all tackled me last night on the importance of being ready to start at seven sharp, so as to get down to Spitok before it got hot, and here you are still eating."

"Jim will insist on talking about skushoks. He sat up late last night in order to become an authority on monasteries. We'll be ready in five minutes—at least Alison and I will be," said Mary rising. "I leave Jim to you."

"I shall have loaded my pipe and mounted my fiery mongol steed with the string harness and the carpet saddle long before you've done powdering your noses," said Jim, as the women went out, and he was as good as his word.

John would be leaving for the Nubra in three days' time, and to-day Mary had proposed for a holiday from John's survey work and Jim's hospital in order that they might visit the gumpa at Spitok. Both she and Alison were very interested in the monasteries, and had already visited those in Leh. Jim was always ready for an outing of that description, although he did not take monasteries very seriously; but John, on the other hand, concealed quite a lot of knowledge on the subject of Lamaism.

They took somewhat over the hour riding down to Spitok, and the road was without incident save once when a large, light-coloured wolf broke cover in a little plantation, and the men had their work cut out in

calling off the terriers. Fortunately, the wolf loped away about twice as fast as the dogs could move, and evidently had no desire to fight.

"Long time since I went over a monastery seriously," said John to Alison, when the dogs had been secured. "I had the misfortune once to be roped in by an earnest lady who said she was a Buddhist. She was a re-incarnation of something or other, and used to throw trances in the Resident's drawing-room. I got dragged in, because on the earthly plane she lacked the necessary language to talk with her fellow-adepts, and I happened to own a rather good Ladakhi who talked Urdu well. I hope you don't take it as seriously as all that, because if you do, you'll be disappointed. Half the lamas don't understand the religion themselves even. They patter books without knowing the meaning; they can get through the ceremonies; but when it comes to telling you who's who among the pictures and images, they're generally lost. Not surprising, considering the millions of them."

"I've so far avoided the modern theosophist craze," laughed Alison. "I promise I won't throw any trances—least of all in the Resident's drawing-room. But I really am interested in it all. Comparing the things men believe about the other world is always interesting."

"I think so," said John. "But one finds such a lot of people who can never see anything but rubbish in any form of religion that isn't their own—either rubbish or sheer evil. Wasn't it Akbar who made some remark about there being good in all religions?"

"For there is light and more or less of good
In all man's modes of worship,

—I think that is the quotation,” said Alison. “And most of the time the real essence of the belief is much the same, and the externals just natural human instincts. Take pictures or images, lights and flowers, and things like that—some of the things that people reproach the Catholic Church with; it’s a perfectly natural instinct to have pictures of those you love, and perhaps if they’re dead you put a bunch of the flowers they used to like in front of their photo, just as you would have put the same flowers in their room if they were still here.”

“It seems logical enough,” said John. “And that’s what I think about the externals of Buddhism. Only Lamaism has gone to all sorts of silly extremes and forgotten the essentials taught by Buddha. But I fancy they all had their definite meanings in the beginning.”

He reined back his pony to let Alison ride on up the narrow path, for they had now reached the foot of the steep rock above the Indus River whereon is perched the monastery—a tall cluster of buildings silhouetted against the great hills below Mount Sacrifice.

They rode in through a narrow gateway into a courtyard, where an old lama greeted them—the representative of the absent Skushok—a wrinkled old man in red robes and stained and faded yellow cap. He had no language but his own, but John’s Ladakhi follower interpreted to the best of his ability as they followed the lama into the main chapel up a flight of wide steps.

“That’s the Skushok’s throne,” said John, pointing out the raised seat, heavily painted and gilded, under the shadow of a life-sized image of Tsong Kapa, the

founder of the order, who was flanked by other images of lesser saints or demigods.

On the right of the throne was a little chorten, doubtless containing some relic, beautifully modelled in silver and inlaid here and there with gold and enamel. On either side of the throne, stretching towards the door, were the low seats of the lamas, with the upright drums, like old-fashioned warming-pans, set on end, and the great long trumpets still in place.

The walls were covered entirely with frescoes, beginning at the entrance wall with representations of the King of the Nether Regions and his ministers, all of whom were busily engaged in dealing with various little human figures, who were apparently having a most unpleasant time for their misdeeds on earth. Most of them were being flayed and drawn and quartered and turned into necklaces and robes and girdles for the blue-bodied, dog-toothed ministers of the still bluer still more dog-toothed and thousand-armed Lord of Hell, who himself was radiantly content, ardently embracing his paler blue but equally dog-toothed wife in a couple of his arms, while the remaining nine hundred and ninety-eight brandished various emblems of power, such as thunderbolts, conches, chakras, and the like.

That picture interested Alison; many might have called it obscene, but to her it was not, since obscenity is not set up for worship—at least not for public worship. It was symbolical in some way—possibly of happiness—and when the old lama explained, through the medium of two interpreters—the Ladakhi into Urdu and John into English—that the blue-faced one was much revered and was of the kindest and sweetest disposition, and only tortured the little people in

the sea of blood and fire at his feet for their own good, and because it was his job to do so, she felt more than ever that there was nothing obscene or evil intended in the picture—repeated so frequently—of him and his wife. It was merely a primitive people's representation of supreme happiness, which, of course, would be the perpetual condition of the god who, according to the lama, was primarily responsible for making mankind happy.

On the side walls, leaving the hells behind, were the multitudinous pictures of saints and saintly beings, all haloed with different colours, each with its own story, but which, as John truly said, the modern lama is incapable of explaining. Finally, the whole series led up to the top by the altar and Skushok's throne, with many representations of Buddha, and once more of the Blue-Bodied Lord of Hell and his consort.

Painted silken banners floated everywhere—pictures of gods and demons, of Buddhas and saints, with often little tiny pictures in the corners showing the donor, just as in the old stained-glass windows of English churches you see a minute representation of the man or woman who gave it. Human instinct again, as Alison remarked—the basis of most things.

And behind the main chapel was a smaller, darker one filled with images—all radiating from one great image of Gautama, and running down to the smallest of little doll-like figures ranged in rows on shelves, clothed in real silken garments, the whole illuminated by rows of tiny smoky butter lamps, and heavy with the scent of incense.

That it was fascinating there was no doubt, and Jim, for the space of at least ten minutes, forgot his mask and made no unduly facetious remarks—a frame

of mind that endured until they were taken up to the Skushok's suite of rooms and entertained with Ladakhi tea and dried apricots and almonds. The vacant throne was occupied by the late Skushok's yellow cloak propped up in the seat, and round the walls were hung his hats of ceremony—his round, yellow-enamelled riding-hat with the high peak, his long-flapped yellow cap similar to that worn by the images of Tsong Kapa—and on one side was his private altar with the myriad images, some veiled, some unveiled.

It was a bright, light room and full of interest, until Jim discovered a clockwork chicken reverently placed among the brass thunderbolts—the little twin drums made of the tops of human skulls—and the other emblems of the Skushok's power. Fortunately, the lama had left them. Alison had expressed a desire to take his photograph, and he had hurried away to put on his best gold-breasted robe, for he was a gelong, or, as we might say, a sort of Doctor of Divinity. Jim's unrestrained mirth over his efforts to make the chicken walk up to the throne was therefore harmless.

John had, however, undoubtedly been the success of the morning, with his explanations of the images and pictures, and his accounts of the use to which the various quaint implements were put, and as they went down the narrow path in the cliff side to the walled garden where they were going to lunch, Alison remarked on it, asking him how he had come by it all.

"I just picked it up. It's all rather interesting to me—anything like that. And I've always found that you get on much better with semi-civilised people if you take an interest in their customs and religions and beliefs. They are shy at first, of course; most of them think—perhaps with reason—that the white man only

asks to laugh at them. But when they find you're in earnest, you learn no end, and they're really quite pleased to show you round and talk. And then, of course, Cunningham—you know, the explorer man, who's helped me such a lot in different ways—he's very keen, and he taught me a good deal of it. He'll be up here in about ten days now, and he's coming out to the Nubra later on. You'll meet him here. I've told him to look out for you all. He's well worth listening to, if you can get him to talk about what he's seen and done."

"I wish we'd managed to meet him in Srinagar," said Mary. "I thought he looked interesting; and then when I discovered he was a friend of yours, I was all the keener."

"I was going to bring him round, but he was awfully busy just then, so I didn't suggest it. He doesn't go out much if he can help it, and I knew you'd meet him up here, so I didn't worry."

And then the talk turned for a while from monasteries to mountains, to the glaciers and the peaks in and beyond the Nubra, and they made a compact that later in the summer Jim would come out for a few days to climb with John.

"I can do a bit of medical work in the Nubra to salve my elastic conscience," added Jim. "But I'd love to handle an ice-axe again and see if I still remember some of the snow-craft I used to boast about before the war."

Thereafter, the day being hot and the garden pleasant by comparison with the stony, sandy waste they would have to traverse later on the way home, Jim slept unashamedly.

"It hardly seems three weeks since we came to Leh,"

remarked Mary, apropos of nothing. "The time has simply flown."

"It has," agreed John, and then relapsed into silence. He was thinking how very short it had seemed, and part of the reason of the shortness had really been Alison restfully lazing opposite to him in the shade of a little willow tree. And John wondered at himself—that he who had thought never again to be interested in a woman should find himself interested in this chance-met stranger. But her ideas and his seemed to run so much on the same lines; he could talk with her so much more simply and freely than with other women. She understood work, too—could see that a man's work was the chief thing in his life, did not want him to put it aside to suit her leanings. And he found that now he thought less of the past and more of the present, and that, too, was in a way her doing. She was such an eminently practical soul, always ready to be interested in his plans. Only the day before, when he was working with a theodolite outside the Commissioner's garden, he had seen Alison, who was exercising the terriers, and she had stopped there over an hour displaying an interest in the work he was doing that was surely in no way feigned. Once again he thought how much more pleasant his months in the Nubra would be if Alison happened to be there as well, and he hoped greatly that Jim would bring Mary and her when he came out.

"The Hemis show comes off on the twenty-second June," remarked a somnolent voice, under Jim's topee. "I suggest that we modern materialists go there and see what awaits us when we've been put away in our nice little neat-bordered graves."

"What on earth do you mean, Jim?" asked Mary.

"Just what I say," said the voice. "The annual play at Hemis monastery, which is of the good old unreformed type, is something like the old-English miracle plays—religious instruction served up in a form palatable to the *oi polloi*, such as you and me. We shall be shown in pageant the kind of things we run into when we die and what happens if we haven't been awfully good. I vote we go. We shan't have John to expound, but we shall have Colonel Waddell in our pockets; there's a copy of his book on Lamaism in the Mission library—I dipped into it yesterday."

"You'll see Alec Cunningham there too. He told me he was going," said John. "He's busy at present with a pamphlet on lamaistic painting and things for some pal of his at home. He'll be able to explain things a bit. And anyway, it's fascinating even if you only watch the crowd. I found them more interesting than the play itself."

"Oh, do let's go," said Mary; so then and there it was decided that the three of them should ride over the twenty-two miles to Hemis on the twenty-first, and the rest of the afternoon until tea-time was spent in discussing the Hemis play as described by Waddell and as seen by John.

Then as the sun sank lower they set out for Leh, with the Spitok monastery and hill silhouetted black against the gold of the sunset sky. And John, as had somehow become his habit, rode with Alison and talked mostly of what he was going to do in the coming months. John read a good deal of French upon occasion, but he was not a deeply introspective person. Had he been so, he might have remembered a little quotation, *Parler de soi à ce qu'on aime, c'est presque parler amour*.

But Mary had that thought in mind as she watched the couple in front of her, and wondered whether there wasn't something more than friendly liking coming into being between these two. And then she thought of Alison's history and all the past, and sighed a little, for she liked John very much and she loved Alison very greatly.

Ladakh was doing Alison good—of that there was no doubt. The shadow of the fear which Mary had seen so clearly at her first arrival in Srinagar was gone; there was new life in the clear eyes, a new vigour in her movements, and Mary dreaded so much that something untoward should throw her back again—if, for instance, she and John should really fall in love. She knew Alison's conscience a thing of steel—knew her ideas of what she thought her life must be because of the heritage that might be hers—knew what the mental struggle would be if things came to that pass. But for the moment John's company was doing her good; it was good for her to be taken out of herself, and Mary realised that, quite apart from John himself, Alison had a real interest in the world of which he talked—that some trait in her nature leaned towards the high snows and the glaciers which to most people are such boring subjects.

And thus in the long evening shadows they came back to Leh—through the enclosed bazaar with the old palace of the Ladakhi kings, still gilded by the now hidden sun hanging above them against the white background of the snows fast reddening in the evening light, and so through the tortuous lanes back to the pleasant bungalow of the Mission doctor.

"Don't forget you eat with us to-night," said Jim to John as the latter left them. "Mary has a special line

in potato salads to speed the parting explorer. Guaranteed to prevent mountain sickness by anticipation."

"I shall be there," laughed John. "Potato salads are a strong line of mine."

Alison went to change into more feminine garments with a very confused whirl of Buddhist and Lamaistic lore in her head—endless memories of myriad images and paintings which she wanted to enter up in her diary while they were still fresh. That diary was a solace of hers; she had taken to it at the advice of an old priest in whom she had often confided. He had told her to write and so prevent herself brooding, and the diary was made up of what she called "facts and fancies"—the material impressions she had gleaned each day and the thoughts they had evoked. But only such thoughts as had no relation to the fears that had beset her in the past.

There was an hour yet before dinner, and she pulled out the leather-bound book from her dressing-case and sat down to write. But somehow Tsong Kapa and the Blue Demigod refused to commit themselves to paper in a satisfactory way, for across them, like a film that has been exposed twice, came always another image far more compelling—the picture of a tall man with rather a square face that didn't fit with his eyes, which really belonged to a dreamer—a man who talked often of work and yet somehow in a fashion that made it a personal and enthralling matter.

And with his picture came also the pictures of the country where he was going—the high peaks and the snow-beds, the glaciers and the giant moraines. And she found herself wondering whether he went there only because of the work, or whether, like herself, he had some other reason which drew him. Somehow she

had the impression that he wasn't altogether happy—that he was making up a life out of material at hand when the inner soul of him craved for something else—that, like herself, he was in fact “making do.”

She turned her attention back to Tsong Kapa and grasped her fountain-pen more firmly, but when she tried to get that benevolent figure with the impassive face—the yellow cope so like those worn by the priest of her own faith, the long-flapped yellow cap—on to paper, it was John's words that came to her mind and pen, and she stopped again to recall them better, and then inevitably to recall better the way he had spoken them and how he looked as he talked, and his little trick of saying “like so” when he wanted to make things clearer.

In the end, with Tsong Kapa and the Blue God very hazy still for any one who should chance to read her diary, she realised that she had only a quarter of an hour left for bath and changing, and she wanted to appear rather more smartly dressed than usual. She thought that it was good for men going off into the wilds—it was Mary's idea too—that they should take away souvenirs of pleasant dinner-tables by candle-light and women dressed as they dress at home. She would, of course, she told herself, have done the same for any man in John's position.

And so she was late and came in with many apologies, to find the other three engaged over preprandial vermouths.

“You see we are preparing John for the Nubra,” said Jim. “He is one of these hardy fellows who take no liquor except a bottle of brandy in case of Little Mary getting cold. In a week's time he will think with regret of all the nice things he might have taken, and

when dining for the forty-third night running on tough chicken, will mournfully recall the flesh-pots of Leh."

"If you'd had the sweat of packing the stores I've got," replied John, "you'd more likely expect to find me writing in to ask if you've got enough food in here, because I'm overstocked. Anyway, here's luck. When you come out you can bring a bottle or two of vermouth with you and something better to tackle after we've climbed a decent-sized peak."

"Had a letter from old man Espinasse to-day. He'll be up in time for that. We'll stick him on the rope too and haul him up as well. He always says he loathes that class of thing, but he'll come all the same."

"And what do we do?" asked Mary.

"Sit in the rose-gardens of Panamik and stew apricots against the time we return flushed with glory at the conquest of new heights. The flush chiefly about the end of the nose, of course. I hope you've got a lot of 'new skin.'"

"Are you people coming too, then?" asked John of Mary and Alison collectively.

"My dear John," remarked Jim, finishing his glass, "did you ever know Mary let me forth into the blue without coming herself? I've told her she'll have a foul head on the Khardong—that she will lack breath—that she will lose what skin the Zoji has left her. The woman replies that she and Alison are coming, and, what is more, that having got so far they expect to be taken on to the Saser pass to see a caravan falling over it. Personally, I believe Mary is getting another writing fit and intends to portray the strong silent man in the wild and woolly mountains. If you're not careful, John, you will find yourself cast for the title-rôle.

I, thank the Lord, am exempt. Meantime, here is food, which is a thing I have not seen since Spitok. Let us speed towards it."

It was a good dinner—one of Mary's best—and an altogether delightful evening; but the one salient thought in John's mind as he went home in the moonlight was that some time later on Alison would be coming out to see the Nubra and perhaps the great peaks and the glaciers, which were his chief work. And that was the first night that he went to sleep without thinking of Ethel Carruthers.

CHAPTER X

JOHN SETS OUT

TWO mornings later Alison awoke with a distinct sensation of what one might call "stuffiness"—not an unnatural feeling considering the amount of clothing she had been misguided enough to pile upon her bed in the small tent which she and Mary Lenox were sharing at the larsa below the Khardong pass. Both were very anxious to see the celebrated pass, a good 1500 feet higher than the summit of Mont Blanc, over which runs the main trade-route in Central Asia, and they had taken advantage of John's crossing into the Nubra to come out with him the previous evening and sleep at the larsa some 2300 feet below the pass. Moreover, it would be much more interesting to see the pass with a caravan actually crossing, and John's would be the first that year—it was still much too early for the Yarkandi traders from the opposite side.

It was Alison's first night at anything approaching that altitude, but she had slept comparatively well. Mary, on the other hand, complained of having lacked breath and of having had to sit up at intervals to breathe, so that on the whole she was glad of Ghulam Hussain's voice announcing that it was three o'clock and chota-hazri ready. Many voices outside, and the occasional passing glimmer of hurricane lamps seen through the latticed window of the tent, indicated that John's party were afoot and busy, for mingled with the

men's voices in three different languages they could hear the grunts of the yaks coming up to be loaded.

Alison sat up, lit the lamp, and then began to struggle into such articles of clothing as she had discarded the previous evening on going to bed, painfully aware that it would have been much wiser to have taken John's advice and slept on such articles of underwear as she had taken off. They had a clammy, corpse-like feeling of dead cold and unpleasant lifelessness. Moreover, her breath seemed to fill the tent to the exclusion of the light.

However, the painful process was over at last, and she emerged from the tent into the icy stillness of a moonlit night on the edge of the snow. The stillness was uncanny at first, until she realised that what she missed was the roar of the torrent she had noticed in the evening when the fast-melting snows were sending down their water to the river below. All was hushed now, and the moonlight showed the torrent as a still expanse of glimmering ice set in black rocks.

Ghulam Hussain appeared, a ghostly figure muffled in balaclava cap and cardigan, with shapeless mittens, bearing a steaming pot of cocoa and a covered plate of something to eat, and Alison was glad to retreat back into the tent for a few minutes to glean a little more warmth from the cocoa and the food and Mary's presence.

Then out again into the moonlight, and this time she was able to appreciate better the wonder of the moonlight on the snows about her—on the high peaks at either hand, in the long ravine leading westward, on the lower depression marking the pass which John had pointed out to them the previous evening—and behind them as she turned, the faint radiance and half-seen,

half-imagined hills that hung in the sky beyond Leh, where a faint white blur showed Mount Sacrifice.

This was something new—far better than the Zoji—this was indeed, she felt, the fringe of the real high snows, and as she watched the black shapes of the yaks being loaded by other black shapes—men in loose gowns and queer caps—that strange feeling of it all being somehow familiar, of being just what she knew she would see, swept over her as it had swept over her before so often since she had stepped out of the train at Rawal Pindi.

“That you, Miss Seymour?” came John’s voice as a circle of white light swept over, blinding her for the moment. “Had a good night?” He switched off his electric torch.

“Yes—rather. Mary didn’t do too well, she says, but she’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“She’ll be better when she’s had some food. We want to be starting soon. I’d like everything under way by four o’clock, so as to start the descent on the other side while snow’s still hard. It’s pretty cold this morning, but it’s worth coming for, isn’t it? And in an hour or so you’ll see the first light of dawn catching all those peaks over on the opposite side of the Indus. That always makes up for crawling out of bed at ungodly hours.”

“Worth coming for? I should think so! It’s fascinating. You must remember that it’s the first time I’ve seen real yaks being loaded in the snow by proper pig-tailed Thibetans. And it’s the first time I’ve ever slept under a real high pass. I’d have stopped up all night if necessary to see this.”

“And in three hours or a shade more you’ll be seeing something bigger—peaks of twenty-four and twenty-

five thousand feet. And see the yaks going down over a steep, snow-covered glacier—the first animals over this year too. Hulloo—there's Mary."

Mary it was, heavily muffled, woollen cap well down over her ears and comforter well up to her nose; there was as yet a small space of nose-bridge and eyes that a little later would be filled with goggles.

"Good morning, John. I hope you like my arctic kit. At present I am rejoicing in the fact of breathing without tears or thought. The first part of the night I spent in breathing. Makes one grateful to think that most of one's life the operation is unconscious. It's tiring. But any way, I haven't got the headache that Jim promised me. Where is he?"

"He's gone on with the leading yaks. I've got some unladen ones breaking trail. They're well away now, and I don't suppose you can see them unless these black dots are they. He's thoroughly happy this morning, I fancy—he loves snow."

Akbar Khan appeared at this point to tell John that the last animals were loaded, and a few minutes later Alison and Mary climbed on to the two saddled yaks which were waiting for them, and followed John across the frozen torrent-bed. It was a weird experience for Alison, this moonlight ride on the great shaggy animal that picked its grunting way between the rocks and ice and over the snow. The movement was easy—far easier than that of a pony in the same conditions—but there was a feeling of powerlessness as she sat there holding a rope fastened to the creature's nose-ring; she amused herself by trying to guide it, pulling the rope across now up to one great curving horn, now to the other. The yak merely grunted a little more, but took no notice, picking its methodical way upwards, and

once removing firmly from its proposed path a smaller yak who evinced a desire to delay upon the way. Alison remarked large tufts of black hair upon the left horn of her mount where it had prodded the smaller animal out of its way, and was glad that she had been on the bigger beast.

Then presently the progress became slower as the ascent steepened, and the yaks got more or less into one long line, following in each other's traces in the hard, frozen snow. The night was utterly still with the intense frost, but all about her she could catch the quaint whistling calls of the yakmen as they urged their beasts onward, the snorting and grunting of the animals, and John's occasional "Shahbash! shahbash!" to the men.

Alison liked that trait in John, his habit of cheering on his men rather than of swearing at them for not going fast enough; she understood why they would work for him so cheerfully.

A check in front where a yak had slipped into a softer patch of snow—a half-bred dzo it was really, a smaller animal showing its cow ancestry—held up her progress, and Mary caught her up, and then John appeared from the rear, where he had been helping up the laggards.

"What price the rodeo?" called Mary. "But I'm glad I'm riding and not on my feet in this air."

In front of them three or four men wrestled with the dzo, whose load had slipped in its struggles to extricate itself. They got it clear at last, and then had to reload it. Alison watched them for a minute or two roping on the sacks of flour which formed its burden with the coarse, hairy ropes with the quaint wooden hooks at their ends. The men's faces under their fur-edged caps

were jet-black against the snow—their long pig-tails were black streaks against the colourless grey of their dirty gowns—their words were utterly incomprehensible, and yet somehow it seemed to Alison once again that she knew it all before.

“There’s the dawn now—look!” said John suddenly, and she turned to see the cone of Mount Sacrifice loom up and brighten clear ivory against the paling sky behind her. As it whitened and whitened the shadows fell away from below it and to either side, and a long line of white peaks came out one after another against the sky, now faint blue instead of indigo, until the whole range showed as one long expanse of snow above the still formless shadows below—snow-peaks that cleared from bluey-white to white, from white to faint rose, and then for a moment to gold as the sun’s first rays struck them, and turned their cold lifeless beauty to the sudden living flush of dawn.

Alison instinctively held her breath at the wonder of that daily miracle, seen for the first time on a more even footing, for now they were well up at 16,000 feet. All about them was moonlit snow and sudden jagged slashes of black rocks, while above them were higher peaks of white snow faintly green in the moonlight and intense sweeps of black shadows, yet over there, far across the Indus, the gold and rose of the first dawn—the light of the sun which for still another hour would be hidden from them behind the great slopes of rock and snow on their right. It was the same sensation that came over her sometimes at the sight of the sunset colours of the naked rocks of the Ladakh hills on the road up—so suddenly and wondrously beautiful that, as she told herself, “she didn’t know whether to cry or to pray,” and generally ended by doing both at once.

The sudden surge forward of her mount as those in front moved on once more brought her back to earth and things as they are, but from time to time, as they zigzagged upwards, she caught further glimpses of the ever-changing colours that the dawn was painting on the hills opposite.

Then in the fast-growing light she became aware that the slope was steepening. Another moment, and she found herself in a regular snow-trench that lasted for perhaps twenty yards at a most uncomfortably steep angle. Then, as her snorting, grunting mount emerged from it, heaving his great black bulk up on to a more level expanse of sunlit snow—the first light of the sun on the pass—she knew that the ascent was over, and that vast space lay before her in place of the continual snow-slope up which she had gazed for the last three hours—infinite space of palest blue closed far off by ivory peaks.

“A cocoanut or a bag o’ little uns, Alison? First up. Mary’s a loser. I have no headache, and shall shortly compose a sonnet.”

Jim Lenox was sitting on a pile of snow-drifted rocks just above her to the right busily filling a pipe. His eyes were younger than she had ever seen them, and there was supreme content in every line of the cross-legged figure in the puttoo plus-fours, heavily nailed boots, Fair Isle jersey seen under the just unbuttoned shooting-coat of ancient tweed.

“Neither, thanks, but I will take one or more of the chocolate biscuits I saw you pouching secretly after dinner last night.” She rolled off her yak, and panted the twenty feet up to Jim’s perch, holding out her hand for the silver-wrapped biscuits he was taking out of his pocket.

"Sheer blackmail, Alison! Hide them quick before the others arrive."

She stretched herself full-length on a flat rock free of snow, and, munching the biscuit contentedly, looked out over the view before them—a deep valley that dropped away below them, hemmed in on either side by giant hills, and filled in the far distance by a tangle of great snow peaks under a cloudless sky—the first of the Karakorum mountains.

"And the road on?" she queried of Jim. So far as she could see, the descent was a sheer wall of snow that presumably flattened out somewhere farther down to form the snow-covered plain far below, where showed the green patches of ice covering a frozen lake. Beyond that again she could not see, since splintered rock walls cut off the view, black rock walls seamed with long snow-slides, and to the left what might perhaps be small hanging glaciers now veiled in smooth snow.

"Over the edge. Eight hundred feet or so first time—patch of flat—repeat, and you hit the lake. When we go over I'll race you if it's hard, for I think the slope's steep enough if you get away before snow softens. Flat on your back is the best way, with a good kick-off. Sitting's all right in its way, but I mis-doubt my trouserings—they're Kashmir made."

"But what about the animals?"

"Oh, they crawl down in zigzags; you can't see them from here, but I've got the leading empty yaks started already breaking trail with some men. The old yak's almost as good as a snow-plough when he likes. There's a blooming glacier underneath, but thank goodness it's buried deep just now, which makes it easy. Later in the year, according to John, it's a pig of a place, especially coming up. The animals slide all over the place

on the ice then, and the men are cutting steps half the time. Ha! Arrival of Mary and John. Conceal the biscuits, and let us offer them meat lozenges and such-like death-bed dainties. Much better for them. Good morning, wife of my bosom! Your nose is gayer even than of custom." Then, more seriously, "How's the head and lungs?"

"No head as yet—breathing apparatus still working," replied Mary valiantly, panting upwards on foot to the rocks, where she settled herself in a corner to get her breath.

"Better have some food, old girl," said her husband, as he busied himself with the luncheon-basket carried up by his wife's yakman, and got down to the task of lighting the Primus stove. A slight wind had sprung up—the pass wind from the farther side—that necessitated finding a patch of cover under the rocks to get the stove burning.

"John ought to be doing this," he explained, "but it's his holiday to-day, alas! Look at him merry-making when he might be attending to our urgent needs."

Alison followed the pointing figure to see John busy hauling on a long rope with which four of the Ladakhis were endeavouring to extricate one of the three ponies he was taking over with him. Two more men, one on either side, held a pole crosswise under the beast's belly to lift it clear of the snow into which it had sunk up to the saddle-flaps. It was unladen, needless to say, but even so it was quite incapable of making any effort to help itself out of the snow. Two more men had to be requisitioned before the united efforts of the party pulled the beast clear, and it was dragged up on to the level snow at the top of the pass, where it stood stock-still panting among the yaks, most of whom had now

made their way up with but little aid. The men also stood still awhile fighting for breath after their labours, the Thibetans with strips of yak hair tied across their eyes to protect them from the intense glare.

John put in three-quarters of an hour's strenuous "merry-making" before he could be induced to come to the breakfast, which Mary had insisted on providing, since he was going on, while they would merely drop down again to the larsa, pick up their ponies, and ride gently home to Leh in the afternoon.

But it was well on to ten o'clock before the last of John's yaks were over the edge and slithering down the now softening snow. The leading beasts showed as little black dots by the snowy shores of the frozen lake some fifteen hundred feet below. The three very miserable ponies, with no pride left at all, were also on their way down—two men to each animal hanging on to head and tail.

"I think it's time I followed," said John at last, after a final look round to see that nothing had been left behind. Akbar Khan had reported everything over and followed the yaks; the only people left on the pass were John's chief Indian surveyor and a chuprassi with John's camera.

"It'll be easier getting up to the pass when you come over. I shall look forward to that beano," he added, and it seemed to Alison that there was regret in the voice—regret that they were not crossing with him now.

The usual salutations—salaams from the Indian personnel—and with a last wave of the hand John set out down the snow-slope in front. He essayed a dignified glissade, but either the slope was not steep enough or snow already too soft, for he stuck ignominiously and

had to resort to the duller, slower method of plodding in manlike fashion.

They watched him till the curve of the snow-slope hid him from their sight, and then turned to go down themselves on the reverse slope, the women on the yaks, Jim on foot. The sun was now really hot and the glare of the snow intense, so that by the time they reached the larsa the two women had achieved the headaches Jim had promised them—headaches that despite much hot tea persisted till their arrival at Leh. Mary, indeed, retired straight to bed. Alison, however, recovered sufficiently to make pretence at dining with Jim, who was in the most boyish spirits at his day's outing.

But she was only half-listening to his bantering talk during the meal—to his two Khardong sonnets composed in his most plagiaristic vein during the descent. The greater part of her mind was following the figure she had seen going down the slope on the farther side of the pass into the unknown that lay beyond. It would be a lonely life out there, for so far as she could gather the Khardong was a barrier to the world at large. The tourists never passed Leh, or, at the outside, Hemis; the sportsmen after big game struck eastward. The country beyond the Khardong seemed reserved to the rare traveller to Central Asia—perhaps one or two Europeans every other year or so—or to the scientific expeditions, which were naturally still more rare. Yes, it would be a lonely life working out there all alone without even a dog to talk to.

About the same time John Marlowe, having just cleared the limits of the snow and camped on a patch of damp turf under hills of the most naked and forbidding rock, waiting for his cook to produce some

dinner, felt somewhat the same about it. It was going to be deuced lonely, he thought, and then wondered why. He had been by himself for months together on other occasions and never noticed that life was lonely. Moreover, this time there was better work than ever before. And yet here he was thinking about loneliness. He shook himself metaphorically—filled his pipe, pulled out a handful of Survey papers and set to read them. The effort lasted for perhaps ten minutes, at the end of which time he became aware that he loathed Survey papers and that his pipe refused to draw. The latter matter might be rectified with one of the feathers from the chicken which he had seen the cook plucking for dinner; the former? it was presently adjusted by his extracting from a yakhdan a limp blue volume in typical French binding—one of Rostand's plays—picked at hazard; reading French was a habit of his when alone. Perhaps it was chance that the particular one taken up—he had half a dozen of them—was the *Princesse Lointaine*.

Ethel Carruthers had long been that for him, but somehow to-night he seemed to visualise Rostand's fairy creation as standing on a summit of snow. Moreover, such of her hair as he could see under the woollen ski-ing cap was dark, whereas Ethel's had been golden. Then as he read, somehow the two images seemed to fuse and only the ideal remained—the ideal that was so much to him in his life and work; and when after his dinner of tough chicken and stewed apricots he went to bed, it was with a feeling of great confidence that somehow this trip would simplify life, that somewhere in the high hills he would find the happiness which he wanted—the dream-happiness that nobody in the world would ever have thought of as being an unsatisfied need

in the very methodical make-up of Major John Marlowe, whose horizon was apparently limited by maps, preferably maps of the more objectionable parts of the earth.

And next morning, as he dropped on steadily down the long incline leading to Khardong village, where he would change his hired transport, the impressions of the day before were less apparent; his mind was definitely turned towards the work in hand—not even the fear of the mountains had a place. There were survey points over half a century old to be located, perhaps rebuilt; there was knowledge of them to be gleaned if possible from the local inhabitants; there were his surveyors to be given their various tasks and to be supervised; there were a hundred and one things to be done. There would really be very little time to be lonely now, and he rather laughed at himself for his thoughts of the evening before. There might also, provided time could be found, be big game to be shot; people seemed rather hazy about the possibilities of the Nubra in that line, but one or two men had left records of having seen very notable heads in the farther valleys.

So as he turned in at last across the narrow little bridge over the torrent, among the many chortens and mñés of Khardong, it was with a good feeling of months of attractive work in front, alternated by the chances of shikar. Above all there would be the very pleasant interlude when Jim, and perhaps Espinasse, and certainly Mary and Alison, would come out and join him in the Nubra, and perhaps he would have the pleasure of showing them the great passes at its head. And showing wild places to people he genuinely liked was always a very real pleasure to John.

CHAPTER XI

HEMIS MASKS

“WHAT a perfect setting for an entrance to a monastery!” remarked Alison as, late in the afternoon, the Lenox party rode up the steep stony incline leading from the Indus plain into the narrow rock gorge sheltering Hemis—the most celebrated red monastery in Ladakh. “It must be entirely hidden in the defile, and there’s nothing to show its existence save these chortens and mñés.”

“It is,” answered her companion, an elderly man, an acquaintance of the Lenox’ who happened to have arrived in Leh three days previously, and whom Jim had invited to join them to make a *partie carrée*. He was a Colonel on leave, armed with a camera and a typewriter instead of the more usual gun and rifle. It was understood that he wrote even to the extent of dealing with Editors and Publishers, and he and Mary Lenox conversed in a strange tongue full of trade technicalities. To compensate for the fluency which, it was reported, was his gift with the pen, he possessed an uninteresting appearance and was frequently dull of speech. “It is,” he reiterated. “That’s why it’s so well preserved. Zorawar Singh and his dogras didn’t spot it on their way in, and afterwards the Skushok played up to the winning side.”

“Who and what were Zorawar Singh and the other gentlemen?” asked Alison. It amused her to make the Colonel talk—when his tongue did get loose he talked

like a slangy book, and really seemed to like getting facts off his chest. He was a man of rather a mediævally narrow mind, but he appeared to have read up various abstruse subjects.

"Zorawar Singh, Miss Seymour, was a general in the employ of the then Maharajah of Jammu, who was sent out by his master with a sort of general mission to conquer any bits of land that he found lying about, and to screw the maximum of cash out of them. That was somewhere in the 'forties, when the Sikhs held the Punjab and Kashmir and the British subaltern talked about the hardships of life in frontier stations like Ferozepur, while the Press had leaders about the need of a definite frontier policy. Among other bits of land, Zorawar hit on Ladakh, and being a fighting man he mopped up the Ladakhis who weren't, and then sent in the usual 'veni, vidi' despatch to master at Jammu. He extracted such valuables as the country held, and sent them along with the despatch. He had a good way with him, had Zorawar, and if he hadn't been foolish enough to take on a winter campaign he might have conquered Thibet as well, which would have altered the world a bit. Think of Lhassa as a sub-capital of Kashmir, which it might have been. Only instead, the Thibetans cut Zorawar into little bits, when he was safely dead, and boiled his fat to make charm for bravery out of. The Thibetan of those days knew a fighting man when he saw one, and respected him accordingly. All that apropos of the Hemis defile, which saved the monastery at Zorawar's first appearance. Good thing to live up side valleys when there are invasions going on. Side valleys are responsible for half the antiquated race survivals one comes across."

"And that's why the Maharajah of Kashmir is the

owner of Ladakh?" interposed Alison, as the Colonel stopped to light a cigarette—a peculiarly nasty cheap bazaar article from a gaudy packet.

"Even so, and the descendant of the last king of Ladakh is a gelong in the monastery here. You'll probably see him. Nice, priestly looking old man—thin and ascetic-faced. Much more what you'd expect to see there than the most of the monks, who look—well—rather like me—over-nourished."

Alison looked sideways at her companion's rather full red face, podgy nose, and small eyes. He certainly was not ascetic, but that last remark of his betrayed a certain unexpected sense of humour. He could laugh at himself sometimes, even if he was inclined to nurse number one very carefully.

"You've seen the play before?" she ventured.

"Once," he answered, pulling at his vile cigarette, and then finally throwing it away to replace it almost immediately by another of the same brand. "Once—two years ago. It was rather fun that year, because we were a fortuitous gathering of world's workers: an artist—feminine; a lady of title with a thirst for knowledge, who wrote screeds daily with a view to educating her country-women on her return; a boxwala, who spent his time sending special despatch-riders down the road, because the whisky ordered up from Srinagar hadn't arrived; and me, looking for cheap copy as usual. There, now you can see the monastery. It's really all monastery, though the part on the right looks like a village."

Alison looked up the narrowing defile and saw for the first time the many-storied building of the monastery nestling in under the high cliff-like wall, with below it a brawling torrent flanked by two or three little gardens,

which seemed to find just enough space under the opposite cliffs. Behind the monastery were some ruins perched on isolated crags, and above and beyond these a gaunt, fantastic snow-flecked peak closed the ravine. The road about them was thronged with people—half the country-side in for the festival—parties of women in their best clothes with perhaps a child, or even two, in the party, the babies carried in the conical baskets worn on their backs by the women. Many were from farther afield, too—from the Changtang, the Nomad country—and a little later Colonel Brown pointed out some of these to Alison.

"The primitive life, Miss Alison. Same like the people in London and Paris always say they'd love to live when all three Rolls-Royces have got dust in their carburettors and the fifteenth under-housemaid has given notice. See that bareheaded fellow with the bare-headed wife?—they don't run to turquoise beraghs out there much—too dear. He's trying to buy some tea and dried apricots, and bartering a bag of pashmina—that's sheep's down, the fine stuff under the outer wool—for it. The hook-nosed Ladakhi merchant will give him about one quarter of its worth. Great thing, trade. And then he and the bareheaded lady will tramp their ninety or a hundred miles back to the ancestral tent with the handful of tea and three fistfuls of apricots packed up with their rags. That's their luxuries for the next twelve months."

"How can you tell they're Nomads?" asked Alison, reining up her pony to watch.

"Easy, when you know. Man's got boots of sorts, made up of string shoes with cloth continuations all in one up to his knees. Woman's only got one robe and no trouserings instead of the over and under robes and

long trousers, and the man's got a cheap wooden spoon in his belt instead of a brass one. Brass is a sight too dear for a Nomad shepherd—a brass spoon probably costs the best part of a bob."

Jim and Mary caught them up here, and they turned left-handed up a narrow lane under the monastery walls in the wake of a rather superiorly dressed Ladakhi in plum-coloured robe and fur cap—the lay manager of the monastery estates. He stopped at the door of a little walled garden and pointed proudly to a small white wood notice-board on which was written in ink, in a combination of small and large letters, "maJor IENoxs." Alison rather suspected the Leh postman's hand in the matter, a somewhat clown-like character whom she had remarked among the crowd on her way up, for Leh business comes to a distinct standstill during the Hemis festival.

Still there was no denying the monastery's forethought in the matter of guests, and the garden was swept and garnished and the tents already up—the servants had been sent on the evening before. It was a tight fit for three tents, but just possible, and there was an open-fronted building which served as dining- and sitting-room where the four of them presently assembled for a late tea after their twenty-odd-mile ride.

"There's a rehearsal going on now, I hear," said Colonel Brown, after his seventh slice of bread and jam. "They won't be dressed up, but you get an idea of to-morrow's show."

The women decided to go up at once, provided Colonel Brown had finished his tea. He hurriedly disposed of the fourth helping of jam at this remark, bolted his tea, and rose to his feet, lighting another of

his appalling cigarettes. Jim said he would prefer to wait for the real thing, and retired to the comfort of a long chair, a pipe, and the home *Times*, which had only arrived the evening before and which he had not yet opened.

They made their way up a very steep little lane, where an unfortunate dog lay dying—its spine appeared to be broken—several days ago, by the look of it—but the Buddhist, like the Hindu, has a prejudice against putting suffering animals out of their misery—passed two other dogs chained up close to the door, displaying all the sweetness of temperament which might be expected from dogs whose whole life has been spent on a chain—in through a lowish door round a dark passage, ducking their heads to avoid an open-topped wooden water-pipe carrying a flow of doubtful water from the hillside towards the monastery kitchen—round another corner, and so into a great open courtyard where stood two tall masts, one bearing a large quantity of printed prayer-flags, the other a couple of yaks' tails, potent emblems against demons.

The courtyard was full of people, as were also the surrounding roofs and the many balconies of the main building, for it was the theatre. The only actual seating arrangements were the balconies reserved for ecclesiastical dignitaries and their friends, and in a lower building opposite an open-fronted room and several smaller chambers with windows giving out over the courtyard. These were reserved for the foreign visitors—the Europeans, Hindu officials, and soldiers of the Maharajah's troops at Leh; the latter come there with the soldier's natural love of anything like a "tamasha." The far corner was already occupied by half a dozen Ghurkas in their beloved undress of black shorts and

coats, gaudy scarves from which slung their kukries and rakish glengarry caps. They were prepared to enjoy themselves wholeheartedly. Beneath the space reserved for the European and official visitors was the orchestra—a row of lamas with the clarinets, long trumpets, and warming-pan drums. The crowd at large stood round in packed ranks or found seating on roofs, walls, and niches.

In the centre of the open space, from which the crowd was partly screened off by a low trellis-work, and still more by the care of two stalwart lamas armed with whips, two rows of lamas were engaged in an intricate dance.

"That, as far as I remember," said Colonel Brown, as they came out into the balcony of the upper room, "is the dance of the lost souls—the ones like Kipling's merchant, who died and couldn't find any one to take him in."

They had, however, arrived rather too late, for it was the last item of the rehearsal, and when it finished in a wild rush of screaming spirits fleeing up the steep stairway into the main building, the orchestra rose and followed them, and presently the crowd began to disperse after waiting a while to watch a large banner bearing the image of a saintly lama being let down from the roof. It was a noble banner, covering some three stories, and getting it into place no mean feat, involving some gymnastic work up one of the masts by a fat lama whom no one would have thought could climb so well.

On their way down again to the walled garden they stopped to let some laden ponies pass—a European's kit, evidently, going up the narrow ledge on the opposite side of the torrent where there was already one

small camp—a bearded gunner subaltern on shooting-leave, who had come in to see the festival.

“Hulloa, that looks like Cunningham’s kit,” said Brown. “It is Cunningham’s lot—I know that Pathan. I heard he was coming up. We must try and get hold of him to-morrow to tell us about things—he’s rather an expert in this line.”

After watching Cunningham’s ponies and men making their way across the torrent on the frail little bridge of a few flat stones supported on two slender poplar trunks, they entered the garden, and after an early dinner, made for bed.

Alison, however, could not sleep that night and lay awake listening to the distant music in the monastery above. It was fascinating to hear the soft drone of the long trumpets, mellowed by the distance, pealing out over the valley; then, as they died away, the shrill notes of the clarinets took up the strain, a monotonous haunting melody that presently died away into silence, to be succeeded later by the trumpets once more—the great brass and copper trumpets. It seemed always the same tune, strangely monotonous, and yet strangely satisfying in that quaint place—probably the identical air that had been played nightly for hundreds of years. It went on for an hour, and then finished with the soft, sweet notes of the clarinets, and thereafter was silence, silence broken only by the faint sigh of the night-wind stealing down the ravine from the snow-flecked peaks above.

At last Alison got up, pulled a coat on, and stepped out of the door of her tent in the hope that the movement and the fresh air—the night was cool—might induce sleep. It was a moonlit night, and the hillside opposite to her showed up patches of dark shadow of

trees and rocks and slashes of silver light. At one point was the flickering red of a fire—Cunningham's camp, she judged, and a little way from the fire a triangular patch of light which she took to be a tent door. Evidently Cunningham, if it was indeed his tent, was sitting up late. Then as she looked, the light went out.

But as she went back to bed she found herself taking a queer interest in the stranger whose tents lay opposite. She had heard somewhat about him from John and a little from Mary, and she looked forward to meeting him. Ladakh was a quaint place—as Mary had said, a very dream-kingdom of unreality. It seemed natural to take an interest in perfect strangers—to wonder why they were here at all—to conjure up stories about them. All the people she had so far met had certainly been interesting, even if they were sometimes peculiar.

Take Colonel Brown, for instance. Anywhere else she would have dismissed him from her mind the moment he had gone. Just a rather gross, fattish, dull kind of man, different from the majority of his class in that he dabbled in writing instead of working at sport—selfish, probably, she thought—lazy also in his fashion—fond of the good things of life in rather a boorish way—gourmand, but not gourmet. She thought of the bread and jam and the vile cigarettes, and laughed to herself. And yet up here in Ladakh, even he seemed at times to be interesting. And then she wondered whether it was that the atmosphere of Ladakh invested people with a false romance or whether there was some magic in the place which brought out a side of people that elsewhere would always remain hidden—that, as Mary would have phrased it, lifted the mask for a moment.

Then she went to bed again, this time to sleep, still

wondering about Ladakh and its effect on people. In the tent a few yards behind hers Brown also was lying awake and smoking one of the ghastly cigarettes, which were really very bad for him. But tobacco had become a necessity; with it he had become accustomed to flog his imagination into producing something that could be set on paper. But then Brown wasn't really an author; his soul leaned to heavy rifles and shikar of all sorts, to polo ponies and such-like, only life had decreed that instead he should beat a typewriter for his soul's good and "hunt copy," getting what solace he could out of it by sometimes letting his fancy run riot and writing imaginative yarns about the things he would have liked to do.

And on the farther side of the valley, a couple of hundred yards off, Alec Cunningham was also awake, despite the fact that he had put out his light. Camp life is always small in India, but doubly so is life in Ladakh. Inevitably you know within five minutes of arrival who are the party in the camp opposite. Cunningham knew that it was the doctor from Leh, *i.e.* Lenox, and that there were two women—*ergo*, the second must be the interesting Miss Seymour, whom John Marlowe had mentioned. Equally certain was it, therefore, that he would meet her to-morrow—presumably to find that he did not know her at all—that, being a fool, he had imagined all sorts of possibilities, because of her name—that he had never known her—he was sure of that, in any case, but that he had never known any of her people. Still the idea kept him awake for a while, and Alec Cunningham had thought that there was nothing in the world now that would keep him awake at the end of his day's work except some-

times the dogs. But they were good to-night—sound asleep on the floor at the head and foot of his bed.

Then presently they all slept, to awake next morning with the masks firmly fixed into place again—Alison cheerful and care-free; Brown concerned regarding food and “copy,” with his slightly mocking air about half the things he saw—you have to mock if you are at heart an idealist manqué; Alec Cunningham, explorer, chiefest of authorities on Central Asian glacier and kindred subjects, lacking in human interest and transparently full of dry-as-dust knowledge. Jim Lenox, of course, was habitually masked, so perhaps the only person who didn’t have to disguise herself was Mary. She could afford to come to breakfast and be herself. But then Mary had found life good over a long space of years, and it is only the poverty-stricken actor that has to go in for so much disguise. Jim Lenox perhaps was an exception to this rule, but then he masked as a pose rather than from any necessity. It pleased him to do so, since he found it easier to read his fellows from behind a mask, and that amused him unfailingly. And in any case, were they not all in a place of masks at a festival, where the masks were the chief item in the repertoire?

Owing to a slight misunderstanding about the time—three different messengers had reported three different hours for the opening ceremony, the only clock in Hemis being the Skushok’s, and that had gone out of action some years before—the Lenox party were a few minutes late, and so missed the entry of the Skushok to his throne near the band.

A sort of ceremonial cleansing dance was in progress, enacted by lamas in the old black-hat dress of the Bon religion, the animistic, devil worship preceding modern

Lamaism. A dozen of them, faces almost hidden under the immense circular hats bordered with black fur and decked with little silk flags and ornaments, and gowned in priceless Chinese silks somewhat stained and faded, danced solemnly round the open space brandishing little brooms—branches of the holy *shukpa* tree—and so sweeping away all that might interfere with the efficacy of the rite.

The gorgeous colours of the dresses—there were no masks as yet—the quaint tones of the lama band below her, fascinated Alison; and still more interesting was the dense throng of country-folk, who watched the proceedings, crowded on the roofs of the lower buildings—packed all round the courtyard—the richer dressed folk, men and women and sometimes children, in the balconies opposite, in the highest of which sat the descendant of the kings of Ladakh in his gold-breasted gelong's robe talking with a skushok of greater Thibet.

"I'm certain sure that's cribbed from a Bombay policeman's kit," said Jim to her, pointing out a figure in saffron shirt with flesh-coloured mask surmounted by a round yellow cap. He was one of two lamas whose business was the keeping in order of the crowd, which he did with a whip, pursuing any who dared to enter the "stage" amid the roars of merriment of the onlookers. Apparently etiquette demanded that the women should be beaten upon their great goatskin capes, which was harmless, and not upon their calves, which might have hurt. Any man invading the arena, in addition to being beaten out of it, had his cap seized and examined, whereby the policemen lamas grew rich in needles, which the Ladakhi always carries stuck in his cap. Confiscated also were the little strips of coloured cloth given out as favours by lamas of importance to

those who had visited them for a blessing, and duly presented their small offering of a tiny coin or a handful of apricots, or some such token. But it was a good-humoured crowd who laughed the whole time, minding not in the least the policemen lamas, shouting in uproarious mirth when some more than usually countrified yokel fell foul of authority, as represented by the grotesque flesh-coloured masks and the round yellow caps.

A little later followed a procession showing the nine incarnations of Buddha—nine masked figures ushered in by lamas in full dress bearing lights and huge ewers of holy water, smoking censers and clarinets, the last incarnation, Gautama, walking beneath an embroidered canopy borne by lamas. The masks were all considerably over life-size, adding thus to the grotesqueness of the wearers, whose limbs and bodies seemed like those of children compared with the great heads, one of which—a blue-faced, dog-toothed being with coronet of five white human skulls—formed a striking contrast to the impassive yellow features of the latest incarnation of the saviour of mankind in this age—Siddartha Gautama.

It was not until that scene had ended that Alison, who had been busy with notebook and camera, had really time to look around her and see who were in the long L-shaped gallery reserved for the visitors. At the far end were the Gurkha soldiers; nearer were a group of Leh people, two Hindu officials in spotless raiment, two Ladakhi ladies in wealth of turquoise head-dress and myriad gold ornaments under their rich-worked shawls of festival—no goatskin capes for ladies of that rank. Nearer still, the few Europeans—Colonel Brown, with the inevitable cigarette in his mouth, busy with an

elaborate camera; Jim, daubing in a notebook—he had a knack of producing rough sketches; and Mary, with a tattered copy of Waddell's *Lamaism of Thibet* open on her knees, talking to a tall, thin, elderly man with keen eyes and grey hair.

As Alison looked round—the procession had just stopped, and the nine figures of Buddha in nine of his more important terrestrial lives had seated themselves to receive the adoration of various masked figures emblematical of the various orders of spirits—Mary turned to her.

“You haven't met Mr. Cunningham, have you, Alison? Miss Seymour, Mr. Cunningham. Like the rest of us, she's heard all about you from John Marlowe.”

CHAPTER XII

ALEC AND ALISON

SO fate had been too strong, after all, had brought about this marvellous coincidence that he had laughed at himself for even imagining as possible. Such was Alec Cunningham's thought as he took Alison's proffered hand and murmured the conventional formulae, looking into her face the while.

It was not altogether what he would have expected; the eyes were a hazel, with a touch of yellow in them, that in certain lights might almost be amber; there was a greater width of brow. The mouth, however, showed a likeness: there was the same soft turn to the lips, a mouth that might be wistful or firm turn by turn. The hair too, yes, that also was the same—the rich, soft brown that held here and there little flecks of gold. The nose, less well chiselled than it ought to have been—Alison always realised it was her least good feature—recalled no likeness to him.

For at the end of five minutes' conversation with Mary Lenox, to whom he had introduced himself in the way that one does in such places as Ladakh—at first sight—Alec Cunningham had tactfully ascertained that Miss Seymour had relatives in Ireland and Scotland; remarked that her name was Alison, and knew now that the daughter of the woman who had been the soul and inspiration of his life was here in Ladakh, in Hemis—that in a minute he would be speaking with her. It needed all the hard-won mastery over himself, all the

fierce discipline he had made his rule of life through the years, not to let the great gladness that swept over him at this, in a way, resurrection, be transparent to all the world.

Of Alison Seymour, the mother of the woman before him, Alec Cunningham could truthfully say with Conrad's hero of *The Rescue*, "while I live you can never die." But to see the child of her flesh—to see, that is, the extension, the physical reincarnation, as it were, of her whom he had so loved—was a pleasure intense and keen beyond imagining—something that made Alec Cunningham very, very thankful to the Maker of the mountains that he had been vouchsafed this meeting. For to those who are well past their first youth, to whom the past is so often only dreams, it is wonder of wonders to see it relive again in new flesh—to try and catch the dear, familiar traits and gestures—to discern, if may be, what heritage of spirit has been handed on.

And he thought that Alison would have had reason to be proud of her daughter, who, though not any way to his eyes so beautiful as her mother, had received much of the charm that had been Alison Fraser's—had inherited also, or so it seemed at first sight to Alec Cunningham, a legacy of high spirit, the quality that had been almost the dearest to him in all the qualities he had loved in the mother.

To another man, the sight of the child of a woman one had loved might not mean so much—love of the child would come only if it were his own. But not so to Alec Cunningham; that the woman before him was the child of his "Dream Princess"—that was the fact that mattered, that, and that alone.

He felt tongue-tied and speechless in the wonder of it, and was glad at the sudden burst of music from

below, which heralded a new grouping on the stage, causing every one to lean out to see what was passing, and during the new dance that took place—one portraying the devils the soul will encounter after death—he had time to collect his thoughts a little, so that when next he spoke to Alison it was the more normal Alec Cunningham who spoke, the man who was an authority on various lamaistic beliefs and customs.

“You must come and dine with us to-night, Mr. Cunningham,” said Mary, during an interlude. “We’ve heard so much about you from John that it seems as if we knew you. Also, we are all thirsting for knowledge, and John says you are an expert on all this.” She indicated the scene before them, where the crowd were moving about, and the policemen busy making captures of needles.

“I’m not really an expert,” laughed Cunningham. “I’m merely the collector of information, which I send home to the true experts, who perhaps can’t get out here. These are the real men—men who have made a life-time study of these things. I have only just enough knowledge to know what to look for and what to send them. But I shall be delighted to come to dinner. I live much alone, and it is a pleasure to meet the friends of one’s friends like this. John Marlowe is very much to me; and now I am fortunate also in meeting Miss Seymour, whose mother’s people I knew more years ago than I care to think of.” He turned to Alison and added: “I knew your mother and your Aunt Adelaide long before you were born, Miss Seymour; we were more or less children together, so you can gather what a back number I really am. But it will give me the very greatest pleasure, when you have time, to talk a little

over the past. I refuse to be old—that is the secret of life and work—but with you I will not be ashamed.”

“Oh, fancy your having known mother! I should love to hear you talk about her. Now that Aunt Adelaide is gone there is no one to talk to me of her, and she is so very much to me, though, of course, I don’t remember her.”

And thus it was that Alison Seymour found a new source whence she could learn more of that mother who was so dear to her. In the days that followed, she had many talks with Alec Cunningham. His acquaintance with her mother seemed to have been mostly during the years of her girlhood; at least, that was what he talked of—of their youth in Scotland, before he had come out to India with his regiment. There must have been great friendship, Alison thought; he seemed to have remembered so much—great friendship with Aunt Adelaide, too, of whom he talked as of some one who had been dear to him also. It was strange that Aunt Adelaide had not mentioned him. But then, of course, it was all so long ago, and he very rarely went home now, it seemed.

Of John Marlowe he talked occasionally, and that interested Alison very greatly—the more so when she pieced together the relationship between the two men. She thought John was lucky to have a man like Alec Cunningham to act more or less as a father to him, and she found herself wishing that she had her father, or more correctly, that she had a father like this tall man, who seemed made of steel, and who, though so quiet and reserved with others, could talk in such a fascinatingly interesting and personal way to herself.

“I’ve never known Alec Cunningham launch out like this,” remarked Colonel Brown at tea on the second

day. "As a rule, it's next to impossible to get him to talk at all. Probably he spies the cloven foot in me—marks the end of the fountain-pen and the note-pad projecting from the breast-pocket; but it's the same with others too. But here, with you people, he really seems to spread himself, telling you all the really bright bits out of his trips. Lord! what I could do with copy like that. But I'll be good, and write nothing. It's the one shred left of my tarnished honour, that I don't make copy out of my friends when they talk among themselves."

Alec Cunningham did indeed talk. Mary had followed her invitation to dinner with another for pot-luck lunch, and still another for dinner next day, and somehow he came to lunch as well. And they heard from him precious things that no paper had ever got—of his adventures among the glaciers, of his journeys in Central Asia, of happenings that would have made the fortune of sensational novel-writers, all told in a quiet, matter-of-fact way that made them the more impressive. And to Mary who watched it seemed that all the time he was really talking to Alison.

Indeed he was, for he had seen that, like himself, she had the love of far, wild places—of the great mountains—that trait which had been so marked in her mother. She was a true wanderer—one of those who truly understand the call of the road. Both Mary and Jim were somewhat of the same breed, for that matter, but it was for Alison that he talked really; and small wonder, for it seemed to him that in talking to her, or rather talking with her present, he was talking to the mother—that the years had fallen away and the past come back once more.

"He looks so amazingly young when he talks about

the things he's done," remarked Mary the second night after he'd gone, "it's hard to believe that he's over sixty, as he must be, from the fact that he was a contemporary of your mother and aunt. One could imagine him to be a man of thirty when he's talking like that."

But in reality that is exactly what it was, of course—Alec Cunningham of thirty years and more back was talking to Alison Fraser of the same period. That he described things which in point of time were subsequent had nothing to do with it—it was the eternal spirit of the man talking—that something in him which the original Alison had declared she knew would never alter through all the years—some indefinable quality of youth which was his gift, and that would outlast all the changing years.

And so, when the Hemis festival finished, and the gathering dispersed in little knots of country-folk, with their treasures bought at the fair, their bits of blessed cloth in robes or caps, Alec Cunningham rode back to Leh with the Lenox party.

They left Hemis in the early morning, with the idea of getting into Leh early in the afternoon, stopping for breakfast in a pleasant little willow plantation in the Indus valley some seven miles from Hemis. It was the one fertile spot in an otherwise more or less unrelieved stretch of fourteen miles of sand, stones, and, generally speaking, decrepit chortens.

"It's a 'hungry country,' as Cunningham's orderly remarked to me yesterday when I was practising my rather threadbare pushtu on him," remarked Colonel Brown, extended comfortably on a patch of green turf watching Jim struggling with the Primus stove. "Hundreds of miles of bare rock and stones, and, I suppose, thousands of square miles of useless mountains with

hardly a live thing in them. Little tiny patches of cultivated river-bed and villages, where only about one house in three seems occupied. And yet we come here, some of us. I wonder why? I come here for copy, of course—my trade; other men hunt London slums for sensational fiction. But what is it draws the rest of the people who come here? There's a struggle every year to get on to the Ladakh list of permits; I don't mean the shooting ones—they're separate—just the globe-trotting ones."

"Something to talk about, for a lot of people, I fancy," replied Jim. "Damn all oil-stoves!" He hurriedly let the stove out—it was spouting flaming oil, not having been properly heated before lighting—and set to work again wearily, but with the determined air on his face of the average Englishman who has set his mind to something his soul loathes utterly but which he is determined to carry through. "Once we get John back, I'll make a resolution of self-denial never to touch the damned thing again. Something to talk of, I think—the idea of having been to a place where most of the world never goes to. What the French call *le snobisme*."

"I don't believe it's altogether that," put in Mary, on her knees, cutting bread. "It's the racial instinct for wandering, I think. Who was it said that the average Englishman is at heart a savage? He is really, and the charm of Ladakh and such-like places is the savage freedom of it—the escape from restrictions—the great open spaces and the hills."

"No obligation to wear clothes, to wash the neck—all the chains which have been bound upon the Anglo-Saxon man from his school-days. That the idea?" queried Colonel Brown.

"That's purely the material aspect," corrected Mary, "the outward signs of the inward grace of freedom. It's much deeper than that really. It's the sense of utter freedom to do what you like and go where you please and have a few hundred miles of country all to yourself whenever you want it. I think that is the chief charm. Also, perhaps, for us women it's the time one gets to think; a woman generally is expected to talk, but up here she needn't—she can ride hour after hour and merely think. And that's really a treat."

"It is," said Jim drily, as he pumped the stove, which had at last lit. "I love Ladakh for that reason. I can watch Mary thinking for hours on end. All husbands should bring or send their wives to Ladakh—they'll find they've time to think themselves, then."

"I believe there's something even more than that," suggested Alison. "It's something to do with its being—as Colonel Brown calls it, 'a hungry country.' It's hard in its way—long marches and a bit less comfort than one is normally accustomed to. I believe most people have an idea that it's good to lead that kind of life occasionally—savage instinct, if you like—the idea that normal civilised life is too easy, that it's better for a time to revert, to take the harder lines."

"To fight against worldliness that we may keep the world's respect," said Mary. "I read that somewhere, and I think that's sometimes the underlying idea."

"It's not a savage one," objected Colonel Brown. "The savage is a materialist, who doesn't believe in undergoing any hardship or discomfort that he can avoid."

"No, but he has a profound contempt for the man who can't face them when necessary. And that's probably the part of the savage that clings still so strongly

to the Englishman. He has an innate idea that one ought to face hard things lest one lose one's power of facing them. He really has a fear of becoming too civilised, which to his mind means soft."

Thus Alec Cunningham, and Mary wondered whether he was giving his own view. Somehow it sounded like it.

"So the outcome of it is, some of us come here for *le snobisme*, to say we've been somewhere where most of the people we meet haven't; some of us come here because we're free of boiled shirts; some of us come here to think—that must prevent a lot of people coming up, since to think presumably requires the necessary instrument for thinking with; and some of us come here to avoid getting soft. I wonder which I am?" said Jim dreamily, watching a plate of sardines which Mary had decanted from their tins.

"You know why you came," said Mary. "It was pure economy, to avoid having to buy new mess-kit for another five years; you said you would be able to have your waistcoat taken in after this. You know it wouldn't stand letting out any more."

"Ladakh—Ladakh, dear land of space,
Thou makest me beam all over my face,
For thou causeth my wife to quietly think
And my manly waist to visibly shrink,"

chanted Jim. "Eureka! Talk about poetry! Didst ever hear such a poem of rapt content! If I was an Oriental poet and Brown was an Eastern potentate, he'd stuff my mouth with gold for these lines. Meantime, since we are only ordinary mortals prone to split infinitives, I myself have to stuff it with sardines. Pass the plate, Alison. Strange to think of the power of the

human frame which can transmute mere tinned fish into such a wonderful, uplifting thing as poetry like that!"

It was impossible to continue the discussion in a serious vein after that contribution, but later on, when they took the road again, Mary wondered whether Alec Cunningham hadn't perhaps been nearer than any of them to the real reason. It was a man's thought more than a woman's, of course, but one she could understand very well—the desire to face the hard, brave things—to take the stony road rather than the flower-grown track. She discussed it with Colonel Brown later on, and, since she was of the kind of woman who can get behind the mask, or rather, perhaps, for whom men will sometimes lay it aside for a short space, Brown forgot he was a writer and said more or less what he thought.

"Cunningham's right, you know, Mrs. Lenox. Most of us are that way, though we wouldn't dare say so in public. Afraid of getting soft—the more afraid as we get on and realise that we are getting soft. We take a pride in the marches we can still make—in the hills we can climb. The average man of fifty on the Continent would take a pride in increased intellectual powers—the middle-aged Englishman is far more concerned with the question whether he can still play a decent singles. The savage idea, really. Some relic, perhaps, of a forgotten time when the man who got slow in handling his spear went under. The dread of the armchair. I ought to be grateful that with increasing years editors treat me a little more kindly, thanks to my greater facility of stringing words together to fill their columns. But instead I recognise that I can no longer hop up a steep hill, and that a night in the open is paid for by a day of aches and sorrows, and lament accordingly. I often feel I'd sell my soul to be what the majority of my

contemporaries still are—fit men able to ride hard and climb high. And here am I hacking a hired baggage pony on the Ladakh road hunting copy!" He broke off abruptly, as though he'd said too much, and Mary knew that for a second she had been well behind the mask.

But to Alison it seemed that they had forgotten one possible explanation, and that was that people—some people—came to Ladakh and the far, wild places in the hopes of knowing themselves—of finding mastery over themselves—the mastery that comes only from knowledge of self—of the intricate complicated factors that make up our many-sided personalities—the knowledge that might let us act, as in the long run we would really wish to have done instead of being swayed by senseless impulses. Simplification of life, as life was inevitably simplified in these places, must lead to simplification of thought and clarity of outlook. One could look back into the past more freely, see and understand life better in the quiet air of the high places, with immense space all about one—balance things—get a new sense of proportion in life. That, really, was what she had come for, and it seemed to her that she had achieved it in some measure, and that in achieving it she was finding more peace than had ever been hers before.

In the glaring afternoon sunlight they rode up the long five miles into Leh, over a white expanse of stone-strewn sand, through a little rock gorge, and in between a long series of chortens flanked by the Muhammadan cemetery—hundreds of tiny little mounds—a lifeless landscape that Alison christened mentally the valley of tombs, since the chortens also are a form of tombs in that they are primarily designed to hold the ashes of deceased Buddhists, though often now they are built as

entry gates to villages and adorned with paintings of all sorts.

Then Leh received them into shade and trees and pleasant bungalows. Cunningham went into camp in the garden of the Residency, where Darweza Khan, whom he had dropped at Spitok on his way up the Indus valley to Hemis from his trip downstream seeking Dard remains, had brought in the heavy baggage and got camp ready.

Darweza had all in readiness—the big tents pitched—at Hemis Cunningham had travelled light—and scones of his own making ready for master's tea. He had, moreover, laid in a stock of meat, and Boris and Nushka fawned about him, for, next to Cunningham, Darweza was the chief figure in their universe—Darweza, who supervised their food and talked to them endearingly in what he called English when they were good, but in guttural Pushtu abuse if they misbehaved themselves.

Cunningham knew Leh well; many times that garden had sheltered his camp—sometimes on his outward way, at others on his return to comparative civilisation after a year or two's hard marching and climbing, and he loved it. But it had never seemed so attractive as on this afternoon when he had ridden into Leh—not indeed with the princess of dreams, but with her daughter. That evening, for once, he did no work—he sat out in front of his tent watching the stars come out above the great hills to southward, and there was great content in his heart—a feeling that life had been good to him, that he had indeed been vouchsafed much.

He sat there late that night watching the well-known constellations that had been so often his companions in the high mountains—in the wide deserts that he had

crossed to reach the mountains where lay his work. The dogs lay either side of his chair, half asleep, but ready to move at any movement of his. And he felt indeed that he had come into a place of peace for a time, and there was no more for the moment any doubt in his mind that some day he and Alison, mother of Alison, would be together again—that this unsought, fortuitous meeting was an omen for the future.

At last Boris roused him from his thoughts, rising sleepily to stretch and then lay his great head on his master's lap, as though to remind him that it was late and time all respectable people were in bed. Cunningham stroked the great red head that nestled into the fold of his coat.

"Time for bed, I suppose—little, large dog. That's what you mean, is it? I wonder if she'll like you as much as her mother would have?"

And then he got up, and Nushka woke too and followed them indoors to her special corner on the numdah near the head of the bed—Boris slept at the foot.

During the days that followed, Alec Cunningham and the Airedales became frequent visitors at the Lenox bungalow, for it seemed that Alison, daughter of Alison, loved all dogs, but specially large ones. And Darweza Khan, who, with Murteza, was the only other human being whom the dogs suffered at all gladly, pondered deeply over the matter of this strange "mem," who seemed to hold such an interest for his master—his master, who, as a rule, never showed any interest in "mems," and who still more strangely appeared to exercise power over the dogs, who hitherto had considered their world as made up of Alec Cunningham and his two Khattacks.

If Mrs. Dashwood had been in Leith, she would have been at a loss for at least five minutes to explain this new Alec Cunningham. At the end of that period her fertile mind would have evolved a theory about old men catching the disease worse than young ones, and she would have rounded off her explanation with some such trite tag as "no fool like an old fool."

CHAPTER XIII

SUMUR

THERE is an overpowering immensity about the hills of Ladakh; everything is on such a gigantic scale, even, as John Marlowe had remarked to Alison that day above Gund, to the very pebbles they sometimes drop round your head. Nowhere, perhaps, is that immensity so suddenly striking as when you cross the bed of the Shyok River near Tirit to reach the suspension bridge of the trade-route, which has now replaced the goatskin raft ferries that have done duty for hundreds of years and still do duty at nearly all the other crossings of this huge glacier-fed river, which, though it loses its name on joining the Indus, is in point of fact almost its equal in size and volume at the point of juncture.

From the Khardong pass your road lies down a valley, and after Khardong village down a steep gorge—picturesque indeed, with its high walls of rock and conglomerate—gigantic cliffs by any other scale where the gorge bottom is at times little more than thirty or forty feet wide—a very knife cut in the thousand-foot cliffs that wall it. And later, when actually in the Shyok valley, the road hugs the cliffs of the left bank, now almost at water-level, now slung on a rock ledge guiltless of railing, a four- or five-foot ledge with a vertical drop of a hundred feet or more below you.

But as a result of being thus hemmed in either in defile or gorge, or else clinging close to the rock wall

on your left, so as not to have to walk on the edge of the drop where the road is corniced, you do not realise the heights. But near Tirit, when, after a steady quarter of an hour's walk across the sandy river-bed, you realise that you are not yet half-way over to the bridge, whose nearer entrance shows as a little tower of white stone in the surrounding miles of desolation of lifeless sand and rock, you grasp suddenly the true immensity of the landscape.

That wall of rock on your right, where linger still the last traces of the snow, must be at least 8000 feet above the river, for it faces south, and snow in summer up here does not lie below 18,000 feet, while the river is only a shade over 10,000. That saw-edged ridge high above the river on your left as you look down the glaring river valley, where in the centre roars down a torrent of mud-coloured water, its pace throwing it up into high, brown waves for all that the day is windless, must run as much and more, for it culminates in glacier-hung peaks and white stretches of snow-beds. And nowhere a sign of life in all the great expanse, nothing but red and brown rock, grey walls of sandstones, softer masses of disintegrating limestone and conglomerate seamed with trenches many feet deep and thousands of yards long, cut into the earth by the snow torrents in spring, as a knife cuts into soft cheese.

But if, as you may sometimes, you see some indication of life, that that line of black dots in the wide space before you, which might have been pebbles, has moved and so revealed itself as a long crawling caravan of ponies or dzos, then the space seems even greater, for you have, as it were, a scale to measure by, so that the immensity of it all strikes home even more forcibly.

Thus it seemed to John Marlowe one day in the early

part of July as he looked out from a low hill a couple of thousand feet above Tirit village, where his camp had been for the last three days, though this morning it should by now be well on its way to Sumur in the mouth of the Nubra valley, where he intended to sleep that night.

Far away below him with his telescope he could make out just such a string of black dots, evidently making for the bridge from the Khalsar side, and he wondered whether it was Cunningham's party. Cunningham, who was due to arrive in the Nubra this week, had written to John saying that he would look him up, and spend at least a day with him on his way up to the Kumdan glaciers beyond the Saser pass.

John's job that morning was the locating of a survey mark—a triangulated point—marked on the old maps, and shown in the records which he had brought, one of the marks set up by the original survey party sixty odd years before. He knew what it ought to be: it ought to be a pillar of stones built over a rock on which would be cut a circle and dot. But the location of that was no simple matter in a country where every saw-edged ridge was covered with rock pillars, some natural, some artificial. The Thibetan adorns all hills in which he takes any interest with hlato, little stone pillars, sometimes crowned with a bunch of twigs, or a stick with a prayer-flag attached, which fluttering in the breeze acquires merit for him according to the prayer or text printed on it, and so repels the demons of the wind and snow and the great mountains. Sometimes the hlato is gaudy with red paint, and adorned with yak and goat horns in large quantities—these also having devil-scaring powers. To locate, therefore, one small pillar of stones was not easy, and, moreover, from other data

it appeared that an error had been made in the height shown on the map, for this particular station, so that he had not even that aid to guide him. Given a definite height, he could at least have discarded many otherwise possible points without troubling to visit them.

Three days previously, however, fortune appeared to have smiled upon him, for he made the acquaintance of an ancient Chinese-faced man, who after much thought had stated that in his grandfather's time a white man had come there to make maps and had built stone pillars—one upon yonder hill. When he himself was a boy he remembered the pillar which had a tall pole in it. That had fallen many years ago, but he thought he could find the pillar or the place where it had been, and he would then guide the sahib there. After which he joined his wrinkled hands before his face and murmured "Ju!" which being interpreted means "good" or "good day" or "your good, excellent, honourable self," or anything else in that line, thereafter adding a foreign word borrowed from Egypt via India, "backsheesh." He said it twice carefully: "Ju! Backsheesh!" and John promised duly.

It had been worth it, he considered to-day, for after a long and weary climb up a slope of about two in one consisting of the most disintegrated rock John had ever met, where nothing seemed stable at all, the party led by the ancient had at last emerged hot and wet and weary on the hog-backed crest of the hill, where the old man in triumph pointed out a low plinth of broken rocks bedded in earth, on top of which was a rough heap of newly piled stones bearing a little poplar branch adorned with a prayer-flag. In very disjointed Hindustani he announced that his sons had put that there the day before to mark it, but that the plinth below was

the remains of the original pillar built by the sahib in the days when his grandfather was a lad.

It might have been anything at all, but John was hopeful, since the climb had been so bad. Obviously no road had ever run here, not even the worst form of Ladakhi road; equally obviously no one ever brought goats here to graze, the hill and those surrounding it being more devoid of verdure than the rest of the countryside—there literally was not one single blade of grass to be seen. Therefore the betting was against it being a local hlato.

He set the men to clear off the loose stones on top, while he smoked a pipe in the shade of a large rock and looked about him. It was an ideal spot to set up a theodolite, giving a good view down and up the Shyok and straight up the Nubra, and just at that corner such points were not easy to find. And when at last the stones were cleared off the plinth, and they began to dig away the caked earth and dust and sand in the centre, bringing to light a flat stone, he felt sure that the old man was telling the truth. A little more work, and the flat stone revealed a rough-cut circle and dot, and John knew for certain that it was the point marked sixty years before by one of Montgomery's surveyors.

Apart from the satisfaction of having definitely located the point, one on which he wanted to hinge much of his work up the valley in front, there was a certain romance about the game. He thought of the man—he knew his name, that was in the records—who had built that pillar and buried the mark stone, and wondered what he was like and what the country was like then. He wondered whether the man had rested in the lee of the big rock, where he had smoked his pipe just before; probably he had. Probably he had also

had his midday meal there, as John proposed to do after he had finished his work. Ladakh was not a place that changed much: the rock would have been there, the only shade on the hill. It was, moreover, rather quaint to think that he was most certainly the first white man to come there since the original builder of the pillar; none but Survey people would climb that hill, and none had been there since 1860—that also he knew from his records. Probably his party to-day were the first men at all to come, since the local people had no reason to visit that ridge.

Then he forgot about romance as he had the theodolite set up, and spent the next hour with his Indian surveyor busily taking angles and making records and calculations. There was much to do in the Nubra, that he could see; many intermediate points would have to be fixed, for the few which had served for the original small-scale reconnaissance map would not suffice for the more detailed larger scale modern article he intended to produce.

But it was a good beginning, he felt, when the work was done, and he sat in the shade of the rock eating his lunch and watching the villagers with the ancient rebuilding the pillar and erecting the ten-foot pole which he had had brought up. For luck he topped the pole with the original white prayer-flag which the ancient had caused to be put on the plinth to mark it for to-day. There was a pleasing and ridiculous sense of fitness in doing that; it suited this mad, wild country, where even the suspension bridge of English wire rope and ultra-modern design three miles away was protected by a large red hlato and further guarded from demons by prayer-flags tied on to the wire stays.

But it was indeed an immense country, and he fore-

saw endless climbing to be done—not spectacular climbing, but honest work, merely to reach points that would give view enough for the map—climbing that in other countries would form subject-matter for the journals devoted to mountaineering. Here it was merely part of the day's routine of the triangulator and the humble plane tabler. Survey work when it meant dragging a chain round a vile enclosed flat expanse of forest might be dull, but here John felt it never could be dull, whatever else it might be, since it would be accompanied by all the fascination of the high hills. In fact, he began to enthuse, for the moment quite forgetting the fact that half the time when it came to climbing really high the fear of the mountains would descend upon him and have to be fought.

The pillar was finished, and the ancient drew near to say “Ju! Backsheesh!” grinning all over his face, partly at the thought of the few annas that would presently be his—money values in the Shyok and Nubra are delightfully reminiscent of India of one's great-grandfather's time—and also with genuine pride at his wonderful memory. Had not the magic stone with the round mark been discovered—though the gods and devils only knew what was the reason why white men should pay silver for finding such things!

Then John slid down the farther slope of the hill, over some fifteen hundred feet descent of shale and grit, leaving his slow-footed chuprassis far behind, and in course of time arrived at Liakzhun village where his pony was waiting for him, and a small boy presented him with four grubby little yellow flowers and also said “Ju,” looking hopeful. Europeans are scarce in the Nubra valley. John, however, merely grinned back at him and said in English, “not a hope, sonny!” He had

seen enough of the backshish-giving tourist in Kashmir to know the result of that pernicious custom on the local inhabitant, who, if left to his own ways, is generally pleasing in these wilder parts of the world until he discovers that if you look picturesquely dirty and offer a flower or two, strange white people will sometimes hand you out silver coins. In the Nubra valley, however, they had only heard of this as a wonderful fable from farther south, and the small boy had not yet learnt to distinguish between foreign tourists "doing" the world and Englishmen doing a job of work.

He mounted his pony and pushed across the expanse of sandy plain dotted with chortens and mǎnés, which lay between Liakzhun and Sumur. It was a short ride, and within an hour he found himself in the winding lanes, mostly serving also as water-channels, which led through the thorn-fenced fields of Sumur—narrow, stony little lanes gemmed with wild-rose bushes in bloom, a delightfully green and fertile oasis after the country in which he had spent the rest of the day.

And as he entered the garden where his camp had been pitched, he saw other tents and other men there, and so realised that the caravan he had seen in the distance had been Cunningham's after all.

Cunningham was looking younger than ever, thought John, as the elder man came out to meet him; it seemed that the more he worked and the harder life he led, the younger he got, and John wondered if that would be his luck too. But really he had no very keen desire to end his life like Cunningham; he had ideas of saving enough money to buy a little place in England, somewhere in the country where he could get a little fishing and a bit of rough shooting—some place that would

be really his own, where he could be surrounded by the various souvenirs he had collected up and down the earth.

After the first greetings the talk was mostly of work. Alec was anxious to know how John was getting on, and later he turned to his own plans—the further exploration of the Kumdan glaciers.

“I’ve had news that the Kumdan route is open again this year, and I want to go up and see it. It’s rather an interesting problem, that valley. It’s the natural route up to the Karakorum pass, and yet you have these four glaciers which periodically block it. In most of the world the glaciers are definitely retreating, and yet here we have glaciers which alternately advance and retreat, so that for a year or two the road may be open, and for the next four or five the valley of the upper Shyok may be utterly blocked by glaciers which cut across it transversely.”

“I hope to get up and have a look at that part later in the year,” said John. “I only wish I could go up with you now—it would be much more interesting than doing it by myself; but I can’t do that—I should have to work from the wrong end. I’ve got all my points down here fixed now and can go ahead.”

Then he changed the subject to one which had been rather near his heart of late—news of Leh, and of the Lenox party.

“I met them all at Hemis,” replied Cunningham. “I saw a good deal of them at Leh as well. They’re nice people, the Lenox’. And your friend, Miss Seymour,” he added slowly, and if John hadn’t been looking out of the tent door at the moment—Cunningham’s Airedales were concerned about a Ladakhi, who had dared

to gaze in at the gate—he would perhaps have remarked that Cunningham was looking rather closely at him as he made that remark.

John saw that the Airedales were quiet again before he turned round, and it would have needed a still closer observer than Alec Cunningham to remark that he was really deeply interested in the person mentioned. His tone in speaking of Alison was one of mere passing interest, discussing a chance-met traveller on the same road—albeit one, perhaps, a shade more pleasant company than the majority. John was not in the habit of wearing his heart on his sleeve even in the presence of the man whom from a child he had been taught to call “Uncle Alec.”

But nevertheless he somehow kept Cunningham on that strain, the happenings at Leh and at Hemis, until it was time for dinner, and as the older man went to his tent to put on a warmer coat—it was cold as soon as the sun dropped—he reflected a little to himself. John was not given to long conversations about people and the little happenings of everyday life. Mary Lenox was a very charming lady, and he thought her husband one of the best types he had met for some time, but he didn't somehow think that that would have kept John talking about them for over an hour. Remained, therefore, Alison to account for the main part of the interest.

To John, that evening stood out as a red-letter one among the many he was spending in the Nubra. It was always pleasant to have Alec Cunningham to talk to—the older man was invariably interesting—and he had the gift of firing the enthusiasm of the few people who were interested in his special line of work. But

that night it was more that he was a link with the life left behind over the Khardong pass, that he spoke of the Lenox' and Alison, which enthralled John. For once in a way that night John was dissatisfied with his camp and his tent; tent life was all right for a time—it was amusing when one was a subaltern—it was attractive as a holiday—but was it good enough indefinitely? And the alternative to it even when he got back to civilisation was the usual comfortless bachelor quarters in mess or club or perhaps Indian hotel.

Thoughts of Mary Lenox' bungalow came up to his memory—the quiet comfort, the sense of home, the feeling of a presiding deity who made things nice for one, who dealt with cooks and such-like;—this reflection was probably due to the rate at which his cook had recently been expending or consuming cocoatine, impossible to replace where he now was, and parcels from India would take months, so that John had horrid visions of a cuisine carried out with smelly country ghi.

But the upshot of his reflections was that he fell asleep toying with dreams of a nice bungalow properly looked after; and he didn't think of the ideal on this occasion—he rarely did think of her now; it would be some one like—well, rather like Alison Seymour—some one who would also be able to appreciate camp-life if camp-life was necessary or desirable for a time.

Probably only the confirmed bachelor passes the rubicon of forty without sometimes dreaming of the pleasures of a real home, and John was certainly not of that class, for all that he happened to be unmarried. And that last fact was only due to chance or fate. His wandering had always carried a something of home about it—his camp arrangements spoke of a suppressed

leaning towards domesticity—he would wander, but with him wandered his possessions. Given therefore the right woman, it was probable that he would settle down extremely comfortably to domesticity, provided that the woman was wise and salted the domesticity with interludes of pleasant wandering.

So at least considered Mary Lenox, who happened to be thinking over that subject that same evening in Leh, and she was a good judge of some men—of most men, in fact. The reason for her thoughts was the letter received by her husband from Espinasse definitely announcing his arrival in Leh for early in August, whereupon Jim had forthwith commenced to make plans for the Nubra trip, and the zest with which Alison discussed the matter might have been due to her desire to see strange places. But to Mary it seemed that an ever stronger spur at the moment was the prospect of seeing a certain John Marlowe. And she had pondered over the pair of them, and come to the conclusion that they ought to suit very well. Then like a thundercloud on a pleasant sky had recurred the thought of Alison's family. What would John make of that and, still more, what would Alison do? Alison was not by nature one of those who live for the day—she could always see or imagine the future. Just at the moment she might be recuperating and forgetting in living for the day alone, but later she would wake up again and think of the future, unless, that is, she had changed her ideas about life and marriage, and whether she had any right to what all proper women consider their birth-right, happiness in giving happiness to some one else. Knowing Alison, she didn't think that she would have changed to that extent. Wherefore Mary sighed, and

sighed sufficiently audibly to draw Jim's attention to the fact, so that she had to prevaricate as to the reason.

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what Alison was doing at the moment; she had come to Ladakh resolutely resolved to live in the present, and she was succeeding more and more. She had contrived to bury Alison Seymour of the past—the woman who, it seemed, was denied all that should make life sweet; she had had, as it were, a new birth in coming over the passes, and with it had come John Marlowe, whom she had found first interesting and then attractive, and who now was something even a little more than both these qualities.

When she went to bed that night she was thinking about him—thinking how much better life would be for him if he had some one to help him on, to look after him a little—he probably wanted it—to amuse him when he was tired, to encourage him when he was low-spirited, to bring out the good in him that was so evident to her, to help him make the best of himself, to live best his life in the way he was most fitted to live it. Alison had rather high ideas on the subject of what it meant to be a wife; to her way of thinking it meant incessant work if one was to earn one's keep and one's reward; it meant infinite study and thought if the man was to profit by marriage; but it would surely be worth it—oh! ever so worth it. Of course, it was all fairy stories and dreams really, like the rest of this dream-kingdom of Ladakh, and presently she would wake up and come back to life as it is; but for the moment it was delightfully restful to dream, and Alison felt that, more than anything else, she wanted rest of mind to compensate for the years that had passed. There was

no question but that Ladakh was doing her a great deal of good mentally and physically. The only question was, what would happen in the end? And that question, true to her resolution, Alison refused to consider at present; she who had spent years in thinking ahead was going to try a little of Omar Khayyám's rather risky philosophy.

CHAPTER XIV

NUBRA PICTURES

RATHER more than three weeks later, John Marlowe sat in his tent at the tiny bare camping-ground where the Central Asian road crosses the Thalambuti torrent on a rude bridge before it swings up in a long series of zigzags over the rocky shoulder hemming in the stream, an outlying spur of the great rock pinnacle which, with the one on the south bank, forces the water flowing down from the Mamosthong and Saser glaciers into a narrow knife-cut gorge only a few yards wide at the water-level. High above him showed occasionally the jagged peaks of splintered rock which tower up towards the pass, though that was hidden from his camp. They emerged for a few minutes at a time to veil themselves again behind the drifting clouds and the wisps of mist that swept up the narrow valley, for the evening was stormy following on a day of intermittent rain.

The setting was very different from his main camp, which, at the moment, was planted in a pleasant little garden at Panamik, the last village of any note on the east bank of the Nubra. There were fertile fields full of ripening grim, apricot trees whose branches were heavy with the young fruit, clumps of rose-bushes, some still gay with the last blossoms.

Here was nothing except stones and grey grit, the disintegrated debris that fell daily from the giant mountains around, which, utterly devoid of any protective

cloak of vegetation, were alternately grilled by the intense rays of the sun and frozen by the night air. There was no life either, no signs of human habitations, save only a one point where, buried beneath the shattered rocks of a landslide, rocks of twenty and more feet high, flung hither and thither as a child might fling a handful of pebbles, showed the crushed remains of a stone wall that had perhaps once been a house or a shelter. There were signs of past life in the shape of fire-blackened trios of stones and in the mummified remains of two ponies—a fit succession to the long line of whitened bones marking the road behind him, where the wearied animals, worn out by their long journey, had fallen after crossing this last pass down to a more level stretch where grazing and shelter was to be had.

The evening was also, comparatively speaking, cold as well as being grey and gloomy, with more rain working up the valley, and John, after a heavy day working down the Thalambuti valley from near the mouth of the Mamosthong glacier, was glad of even the small amount of comfort provided by a light single-fly tent. It was covered from the wind outside, and presently there would be the companionship of evening lamplight, always a consoling factor in the more waste and lonely places.

He sat there waiting to hear that dinner was ready, with a pipe and a book which he was not really reading. With his poshtin pulled about him to keep off such wind as still found its way in under the walls of the tent, he was looking out across the Nubra valley to the formidable rock wall on the opposite bank, beyond which from time to time showed up dimly seen snow-peaks, from whose glaciers, now retreated some thousands of feet above the main valley, flowed down the

swift narrow torrents forming the life-blood of the village of Arunu, set upon what had once been a glacier fan.

He was considering the utter desolation of the landscape, and from that his mind turned to life as a whole. He was tired, more or less hungry, and somewhat cold, and accordingly he thought about life, and it seemed to him that his life was getting to be rather like the landscape about him, void of the graciousness and sweetness that surely life is meant to hold.

It seemed to him more and more these days that he was in danger of finding life something utterly grey and bare like these gaunt hills wherein lay his work. He felt more insistently each day that it wanted relief; the gaunt hills were all right for a time—they were stimulating and good for one's manhood, but there ought to be interludes of pleasant countries, of pine forests and gardens, of mossy-banked streams where one could wile away peaceful days with a rod, instead of these lifeless ice-fed torrents pouring down from dark ravines of equally lifeless rock.

And so with life too; there ought to be interludes of something warmer—the pleasure of friends, of speech, of interchange of ideas—in fact, interludes of companionship. And with that came the thought of the different kinds of companionship, and so inevitably the thought of that which can be the best of all companionship—the companionship of the woman who can round off life into one perfect whole.

John's ideal of that was what many people—most women, certainly—would have called entirely a selfish one. He looked upon the taking of a wife as an additional joy to all those one already has—as the completion of life. He had no desire to sell his guns, and the

polo ponies he kept when in civilised surroundings, in order to settle down to a life of wife-serving domesticity. What he wanted was the some one who would share the guns and the polo ponies and all they stood for—some one who would come into his life to share the good and bad times, not some one who would ask him to fit into her life and mould himself to her liking, altering his fashion of living so as to suit her particular tastes. He had seen that happen to his friends sometimes, and that held no attractions. What he craved for was something more like the life Jim and Mary Lenox seemed to have found, where Jim still did all those things which he had done all his life, worked and played in the same fashion as he had always worked and played, but with far greater zest now because of the companionship which sweetened the work and rendered doubly more valuable the play which is necessary to all men if they are to do good work.

That was what John sought of life, what he had once thought would be his, and what he still hoped for. He thought of it more than ever that grey, stormy evening at Thalambuti, and with it came up the thought of Alison Seymour, who more and more during these late weeks had displaced the memory of Ethel Carruthers—who seemed more and more to be just the woman who could give him all those things—who could make life something indeed worth living.

He admitted to himself now—the idea had clarified considerably this last week—that he was what the world calls “in love” with Alison, that is to say, that he wanted her, wanted her for all time. Love is a misleading word when one thinks of it; it may mean so much or so little; it may mean the uprising of the race instinct in the youth who finds the young maiden good

to look upon, and, with Kipling's young man of whom Hafiz speaks, says, "Give her to me to-day." It may mean love such as Alec Cunningham read it—something that would transfigure a man's whole life and work—something that shall last a lifetime and beyond. It may mean anything in between. But whatever it does mean, it does generally, with man and woman who are really attuned, mean "want"—the man's desire to find happiness in taking the woman whom he thinks will bring sweetness into his life, the woman's desire, if she be of the proper kind, to give—to give sweetness and comfort to the man who for one reason or another has become all men for her.

And John wanted Alison more and more—wanted her for all that she could bring to him—wanted her because he felt that with her life would be different, would be better—that he would be better, happier—would make more of life—would find life grander and sweeter in every way.

And then he wondered if Alison would want it too—did she want it? Somehow he thought she did; it seemed to him that she very much more than liked him—that she was well content to be with him—that she had looked forward always to their expeditions in Leh. He felt, moreover, that she was more herself with him than with others—that she let him into secret places of her mind where others could not tread.

Anyway, he would know soon, for the following week they would all be out at Panamik—the Lenox', Alison, and Espinasse. And during the ten days they proposed to spend in the Nubra, he would find ample opportunity to make sure about things, and then perhaps he would be able to tell her what he wanted—to

ask her to take him and his life and make them into what she alone could.

And at that thought, forgetting the very cheerless outlook in front of his tent—the waste of stones in the lowering dusk, the dimly seen mountains across the river, the twisted remnants of the unfortunate ponies near the nullah bank—he went off into day-dreams of what life would be if Alison was only of the frame of mind in which he thought her.

The arrival of Mohomed Din to lay the table broke into that train of thought, and still more so did the entry of his staunch follower, Akbar Khan, asking for final orders for the morrow. Camp was to go back to Panamik, but John was going to climb a hill between Thalambuti and the Taksay lungma in order to make another fixing to identify certain peaks he had seen from the spur above his camp. There would be time to do that and still get into Panamik before dark.

He gave the necessary orders as to who was to go with him and what instruments were to be taken, and the doing of that drove the thought of Alison from his mind, for in place surged up that nightmare fear of the hills which occasionally swept over him for no apparent reason.

There were probably subconscious ones of which he was not really aware. That afternoon on the opposite side of the spur there had been a biggish rock-slide which he had only heard and not seen, but which was probably the starting-point of the obsession that came over him now as he watched Akbar Khan's retreating figure in the dusk.

There had been much rain these last two days, and it looked as if there might be more during the night. In these gaunt hills, which were continually disin-

tegrating, the debris stands at a fairly steep angle when dry, but with heavy rain the slopes become utterly unstable and slip with or without any apparent provocation. And the appalling scale of the mountains renders such slips anything but pleasant, for with the sliding grit and boulders come great rocks like those across the nullah—rocks the size of small cottages crashing down the steep slopes.

John fought with himself and tried to put the obsession out of his mind, and, as is generally the case, the more he fought it the more it persisted. He tried to reason with himself, to point out the futility of such thoughts. Why should he be afraid of the mountains in this cowardly way, he who had faced death often in war and found himself no more afraid than other men, less indeed, perhaps, than many so far as it is possible for any man to compare his fears with those of others? Anyway, fear had not dogged him there as it did here, with far less reason. He tried to put it mathematically—he was a great believer in figures—to work out the comparative life-chances of a sapper officer in modern war and a mountaineer. The fact that comparison proved that the mountaineer's risks came out at some minute decimal three noughts fragment as compared with the unit chance of death for the busy sapper did not help in the least—that portion of him which was afraid of the mountains apparently had not got a mathematical sense at all.

Then he endeavoured to argue out what he was frightened of: was he afraid of being killed? If so, that was stupid, anyway, since he would have to die some day. Moreover, why be frightened of being killed by an avalanche, and not equally terrified of a bullet or a motor accident?

Perhaps it was the solitude of the hills. And then the more logical portion of him pointed out that he had had some very "sticky" times during the war, when he had been just as much alone, had to play just as lone a hand.

But as is the way with such obsessions, it just continued, impervious to a rain of mathematical and logical arguments, appealing only to those unmathematical and illogical things, the feelings, and John eventually went to bed after rather an unhappy evening with the knowledge that to-night he was more frightened of the mountains than he could ever recollect having been before. And, being John Marlowe, he gave it up, set his teeth, and added another thousand feet to the height which he had given himself to climb on the morrow. That, as far as he could tell, would moreover involve crossing a rather nasty-looking slide between two rock ribs. It would certainly give him a better view than the lower point he had originally selected. But above all, it would just teach that mysterious portion of himself which seemed to have a yellow streak that John Marlowe was not going to be dictated to by bogies.

He and the "yellow streak" duly climbed the extra thousand feet on top of the other 3500 originally proposed, and climbed it with considerable speed and success. The slide was quite as nasty as he had thought from below, and the men obviously didn't like it any too much. But as usual they followed John, as all men and animals did. It is so easy to follow a man who obviously doesn't know the meaning of the word fear.

A gathering storm urged him down again, but he stayed there until the last possible angle had been taken, and, as if to reward his firmness, the storm sheered off up a side valley on the other bank, and they came down

in brilliant sunshine—the first really unclouded sky he had seen for four days. Then, late in the evening, he made his way back through the scattered fields of Panamik to his camp in the little garden where the comfort of his big tents should be awaiting him. It was always good to get back to them and his belongings after a period of living on the minimum.

But as he turned down from the village towards the garden, he saw other ponies tethered there outside the thorn hedge, and then observed the tops of unfamiliar tents. Evidently other Europeans were there, and he wondered who they could be, for the Lenox' would never have come out early without sending on word. Then the sight of an old Ladakhi in a fur-flapped Chinese cap, wearing his hair untidily long instead of in a pig-tail, gave him a clue. He knew the old man, rather a character in his way, one who sought to proselytise even the Hindu and Mussulman officials of the district, an evangelist of the Moravian Mission.

Then when he entered the garden it was indeed to be greeted by a missionary and his wife whom he knew at Leh, kindly folk, who were spending their brief holiday in a tour of the Nubra district. They travelled very light, and John felt rather ashamed of his comfortable camp in comparison with what they had, which would have been light for John alone, but for a woman must have meant very little, if indeed any, comfort. John felt a dreadful sybarite.

But nevertheless he accepted their invitation to dinner, proffered as a matter of course. Were they not the first people on the ground, and therefore, by the rule of the Ladakh road, entitled and expected to offer hospitality? One wonders sometimes if the rule was

not originally invented by the Moravian missionaries, to whom hospitality is as the breath of their nostrils.

They gave him news of Leh, of course—of the Lenox' and of Alison, all of whom they appeared to like extremely, but the latter of whom seemed specially dear to the heart of Mrs. Lassen.

John, who, like the Lenox', belonged to that great English community, the Christians—people, that is, of firm religious beliefs and no particular adherence to any definite Church—was not, however, a great believer in missionaries as such. He did not honestly feel that the Oriental improved on conversion; on the contrary, he often deteriorated. Or perhaps—John was open-minded in the matter—the people who did become converted were not the right type anyway, and would have been just as displeasing if they had remained Buddhists, Hindus, Muhammadans, or dishonest pagans.

But for the Moravian Mission he made an exception; they ran a hospital and worked hard therein, and they appeared to him to be a broad-minded folk without fanatical prejudices, and John detested fanatics. Moreover, they were transparently earnest and good and anxious for their neighbour's happiness, and to John the most important command he had ever found in the little Bible which went with him everywhere he moved, was the one about being good to your neighbour. The fault he found with the Church of his upbringing was that it was very busy inculcating the importance of outward Sabbatical observances, and neglected largely the matter of being really nice to those about you. Most of all, it never seemed to tell the average man, like himself, anything about the importance of attending honestly to your day's work. And that, to John, was

one of the most important parts of religion if religion had anything to do with real life; for obviously the God who made the world and the people in it made them to work for some end which He had in view. John was no more orthodox than Jim and Mary Lenox.

But he had a warm corner in his heart for the Moravians in general, and for Mr. and Mrs. Lassen in particular, and it was a most pleasant and homely meal, where after dinner they sat talking of all manner of things, including personal beliefs, in an utterly unprejudiced manner that John, anyway, thought most strikingly rare among the "padre" class.

Subdued murmurs of a crowd in the darkness without eventually disturbed them, and Lassen went out to see what it was, returning presently with a beaming face to announce that the village had assembled without to see the magic-lantern.

"We always bring that along," he explained. "Very often the people come round in the evening after they get back from the fields and have had a bit of food. They like seeing the pictures, and the evangelist explains them. We show them about a dozen—scenes from the life of Christ."

"I should like to come, if I may," said John, and the Lassens were only too delighted at his desire to see their little display.

Outside a sheet had been tied on to the branches of an apricot tree, the lower end weighted down with stones, and the old evangelist, with a younger assistant, whose clean-cut features were in striking contrast to the rugged Mongol face of the older man, were busy setting up the lantern. In the darkness around, dimly illuminated by the feeble light of a candle, John could make out a group of some thirty villagers, typical loose-

gowned Ladakhis with flapped caps and pig-tails, the few women of the village clustering together with a child or two, and two of his own servants and Akbar Khan come there with no idea of being proselytised, but purely of seeing a "tamasha."

When the acetylene was at last going, the young evangelist slid in the first slide, and the older man, a striking figure against the white screen, expounded the story to the listeners. John wondered what effect it would have on these simple folk, to whom religion was chiefly a matter for the lamas, and whose share in it consisted mainly in twirling prayer-wheels or erecting prayer-banners and putting goats' horns on hlatos.

But before long the charm of the pictures had settled over him, and he rather forgot about the audience. To begin with, he remembered that it must be quite twenty years or more since he had seen a magic-lantern, and that was rather fascinating in its way: it conjured up all sorts of childish and boyish memories of a past that had seemed entirely buried. Then the pictures were most notably good, reproductions from a book of the Life of Christ, by an artist who had taken the pains to make his sketches in Palestine and absorbed the absolute atmosphere of the Gospel story.

There was the Annunciation and the visit of the Magi in the stable at Bethlehem. Somehow John felt that these two pictures must appeal particularly to those women behind him in their quaint head-dresses—children are becoming scarce in Ladakh; polyandry apparently has that effect. Then there were the wonderful miracles of Jairus' Daughter and of Lazarus. Then came two which always appealed specially to John, the first being Christ walking on the water. He

thought of Francis Thompson's poem, "In No Strange Land":

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

He thought then of the great mountains, all formless about them, and the rushing, ice-fed river whose distant murmur came up to them on the breeze that rustled the screen. There surely He must walk too, on the stilled waters of the great glaciers under the jagged peaks of rock, and therefore why should one be afraid? It was a good thought to John, whose religion consisted solely in a love of that figure on the screen before him; that was Someone whom he could understand, Someone who was human beyond all common humanity, who understood ordinary men and women like John Marlowe.

Then came the picture of the pool at Bethsaida and the man who had no one to help him, so that "while I am coming, lo, another steppeth down before me." That story was a favourite of John's, who knew what loneliness was.

And then lastly came the pictures of the end—the judgment before Pilate, the scourging, the Crucifixion, vividly thrown up in colours on a sheet tied to an apricot tree in a mountain valley at the end of nowhere, among a child-like people brought up in the shadows of quaint idols and devils. John felt that this, if any, was the way in which something might be achieved—this portrayal in pictures that the East could understand since their whole atmosphere was Eastern—this might appeal to the humanity of the man or woman who saw

it. Here was no abstract theology, but the very essence of the Incarnation, whereby man might love God in seeing Him as man, as perfect man showing forth transcendent love.

John went to bed that night with the feeling of having been somehow into a good kind of church, where you got the "real article," as he would have phrased it. He had, of course, understood nothing of the words that were spoken by the old Mongol-faced man, nor the brief remarks by Lassen at the conclusion. But he felt somehow that he had for half an hour been privileged to walk the roads of Palestine nineteen hundred years ago.

And he went to sleep feeling very much the better for it, and the better also for an evening spent in the company of two people to whom these things were so utterly real, that for them they were prepared to give up much that he and others clung to in life. His last thought as he finally drifted off to sleep was how much Alison would have enjoyed that evening—Alison, who had a very definite and crystallised religion, which she stuck to, and yet who could understand and sympathise with all the people who couldn't believe the things that she did.

CHAPTER XV

PANAMIK

“THE only thing missing is the band in front and an elephant with a large red howdah from which the chief clown throws out hand-bills. Otherwise the circus is complete.”

Thus Jim Lenox as he stood on the edge of the Chamsing Lungpa streams and surveyed their transport fording the swift waters—the grey ice-fed torrent which, debouching from a knife-cut cleft in the high wall of rock on their right, split into a dozen streams over a long sloping fan leading down to the Nubra River—one of half a dozen similar lungpas or mountain valleys hiding great glaciers which contribute so much to the fertility of the Nubra valley—the garden of Ladakh, according to local philologists, who say that the word Nubra should really be “dumbra,” a garden.

They had had mixed varieties of transport all the way from Leh—ponies, yaks, dzos, oxen. But the assortment provided by the village of Tiggur, where they had just passed the night, was the most heterogeneous of all. The caravan was led by quite a good black dzo well laden with tents, on top of which screamed two fowls, attached by strings to the ropes of the coarse pack-saddle. Followed two miniature ponies charged with sacks of flour, topped by the inevitable kerosine oil-tin which forms the portable boiler of the East. A particularly slant-eyed Thibetan with extra long pig-tail plodded alongside, carrying

a hurricane lamp in one hand, while slung in the coarse blanket, worn plaidwise across his back, was the little circular camp oven.

Splashing along in rear of these came two donkeys, only a shade smaller than the ponies and carrying practically the same amount of kit, but in their case it was camp furniture. A small impish boy, bare-footed and ragged, with his fur-lined cap turned back to front to shade his slant eyes from the glare and his loose gown kilted over his knees, shepherded these. He carried no load other than a small home-woven string bag containing a quantity of coarse sattu flour and a handful of tea and salt, his and his brother's meals for the day.

Succeeded three very diminutive brown oxen, each with a pair of leather mule trunks much battered, the space between the mule trunks on their backs being heaped up with the minor oddments of camp life: item a camp chair, item two cushions, item a pick and shovel and two ice-axes belonging to Jim.

Tiggur was short of transport animals that day owing to a large caravan from Yarkand which had just passed through *en route* for Leh, and animals had to be supplemented by man-power in the shape of four coolies, each carrying a large load of bedding rolls, suit-cases, and the like. At the rear of the caravan, with a lot to say for herself, stood the wife of some of the men—apparently the last three coolies, by the way she was shouting at them. She was quite the most imposing figure in the outfit, with her large, astrakhan ear-flaps, her somewhat dirty but gaudy red cloth, silver, and turquoise head-dress, her collar of coral surmounting her rather faded and dirty gown, and the big shell bracelets on her wrists. She was probably telling her three husbands the fate that would

befall them at her capable hands if they didn't bring back every anna of the wealth they would receive for their labours that day.

"I do wish I could talk Thibetan," sighed Mary Lenox, pulling up her pony to look at the scene. "Think what a hit you could make in the literary world with a Ladakhi wife's diary—telling all about her various husbands and how she manages them. The average Englishman thinks he is pretty downtrodden in his dealings with his women-folk, but he isn't in it with the Ladakhi husband."

"I don't know about that," said Espinasse, who was walking with her at the moment. "It must be an advantage to have two or three other lightning conductors alongside of you to absorb some of the shocks."

"Also the Ladakhi can clear out for a few months and go wandering with somebody's yaks or ponies and so escape his better third," put in Jim Lenox. "You can't very well talk of a better half when you share it with two others, even if they happen to be your younger brothers. They're a joyously mad lot; look at them laughing—they're always laughing, and they really haven't much to laugh at. I suppose the only pleasure they ever know is an extra large meal now and then."

He folded up the camera with which he had been taking a photo of the crossing, and then added, "An extra helping of chang, which is the local line in whisky, upon occasion as well. But it makes one homesick to think of these pig-tailed laddies going back to Tiggur to-night and solemnly handing over their seven or eight annas to the wife without even being allowed to keep threepence for a glass of beer. We do it by means of a cheque-book—that's the only difference. I

really feel I see my brother man when I gaze upon the Ladakhi."

"Considering that you have the fortune to own a wife upon whom editors fawn with fluttering cheque-books, your conversation is beneath contempt," said Mary.

"Where, oh where are the fawning editors and the fluttering thingumbobs?" said Jim, looking round. "I see none at the moment. Call 'em up, will you? The last mail brought me tear-stained letters from uncle Cox—now disguised as Lloyds. The English banking world is on the verge of a financial crisis—or will be unless I deposit a few hundred rupees to sweeten my overdraft. Look at Alison trying to photograph the lady. Oh, aren't we coy!"

"They weren't coy this morning and last evening," remarked Mary. "I had to shoo them away from the tent, where they collected about three deep to see me brushing my hair."

"You'd have collected three deep if you'd had your hair done once—the day before you were married—plaited into fifty pig-tails for life, and then saw a strange-looking object that brushed hers twice daily. They were also probably wondering at the enormous white things Ghulam Hussain was spreading on the table. Nobody in the Nubra ever saw a piece of white cloth that size in their lives. The biggest bit they've ever seen is a prayer-flag six inches by eight, and that's printed over with smudgy black ink. For a writer, I'm surprised and pained at your lack of understanding of your sisteren. Let us advance upon Panamik now that the circus has crossed without accident. In Panamik, among the last fading roses, sits John, waiting to give us lunch. But why didn't we bring along a few

laden sheep to complete the picture? The sheep disguised as a transport animal with a wee load of flour or salt on either side always strikes me as the essence of this part of the world. I should love to have a snap of Mary superintending loading the family potatoes on to a woolly little sheep. 'Mary had a little lamb' kind of a picture."

"Lead on to Panamik, for Heaven's sake, Jim. If you go on in this strain you'll inflict another sonnet on us," said Mary, a remark cordially endorsed by the rest of the party.

But John was not among the rose-bushes of Panamik. He was seated on the top of a rock hill over which the road led in order to avoid the river that swept in at the foot of the hill, and in July and August the Nubra is a racing, mud-coloured stream, quite impossible to ford. Just below him a surveyor was busy filling in detail on a map, giving colour to John's excuse that he had come out to check the man's work; but after all, a lone European in the Nubra hardly needs an excuse to come half a march to meet a party from the comparative civilisation of Leh.

"And what's the programme you've drawn up for us, John?" queried Jim Lenox, as presently they were filing down the long descent towards the little hamlet of Tiritsha, beyond which, four or five miles farther on, the village of Panamik showed as a stretch of green under the gaunt, bare hills.

"Well, Panamik is not exactly a society centre. I can't offer you theatres or dances. But we run a line of hot springs with a quaint bath-house attached, where the local people come in for rheumatism and any other kind of ism you can think of. The Ladakhi will wash for medicinal purposes—the affected part only, of

course. Sort of soda, I fancy, in the water, which is so hot you can't put your hands into it. They've connected up a cold spring as well, though, so as not to scald the bathers. My men say it's the finest place for washing clothes they've ever struck. They wash their clothes about three times weekly here. Then on the opposite side of the river, which you cross about three miles above Panamik by the most crazy-looking boat you ever saw—they bale it out first and all the way cross, which is about a hundred yards, and you shoot about a quarter of a mile downstream in doing it—is a rather chic line in gumpas with one lama complete with a thigh-bone trumpet. Told me he cut it off a chance-found wayside corpse himself and mounted the knee-joint in silver. He also has some nice little drinking-cups made of tops of human skulls, but he didn't think so much of those—he'd bought them in Lhasa, where they trade such religious paraphernalia. Buying's not so good as collecting, like he collected the thigh-bone. He's rather a friend of mine and a most hospitable soul, who'll offer you buttered tea the moment you reach the top—it's a steep climb."

"In the skulls?" queried Alison, with a grimace.

"No—at least he didn't to me. He had a couple of Lhasa tea-cups for visitors. But possibly for a consideration, if you're keen, he'd let you use one of the skull-cups. . . ."

"These social amenities are all right, John, but what about the real business? What have you got in the way of peaks? I suppose they're hidden behind these cliffs—I saw some nice-looking ones from the top of the Khardong, but have lost them since. My ice-axes are mouldering with disuse. Peaks is what I came for, and you chatter of lamas. Look at Espinasse's

eager face when I mention peaks! He's thought of nothing else all the way up."

"I will climb a gentle hill that promises a decent view or anything to shoot on it," retorted George Espinasse. "But if you're talking of things covered with snow, where if you drop your cigarette-case it doesn't stop till it reaches sea-level or thereabouts, I'm not on. Lamas and quiet monasteries are more in my line, thanks."

In the end they compromised to the effect that the energetic could climb out of the Nubra behind Panamik and see what new worlds they could reach before going on to the Saser. The others could hob-nob with lamas with thigh-bone trumpets.

Between Tiritsha and Panamik they passed a long caravan of Yarkandis newly come over the Saser pass—big ponies and fair-skinned men, mostly in queer felt hats, quite different from anything Alison had ever seen before in the East. The men were very fair, with golden-brown beards and light-coloured eyes, and the skin that showed occasionally through their tattered garments—they had had a hard journey, by the look of them—might have belonged to southern Europeans. Romance clung about them, to her eyes—the romance of the far, wild places, of the great caravan routes over the deserts and the high passes—the routes that had been trodden for so many hundred years and over which Europe had first come to know the mystery of the East.

And so at last, as the cloudless day grew hot, they left the sandy stretch of plain and entered among fields of ripening grim—the barley of the high countries—and thence past little chortens and so into the thorn-fenced garden, planted with pleasant willow trees and

still gay with the last wild roses. Here John's tents showed in prosperous contrast to the rather tattered shelters of another Yarkandi caravan camped near by on a little open space under some apricot trees, to one of which, a week before, had been tied the Lassens' lantern screen.

Downstream rose high snow-peaks of the Ladakh range; upstream lay the serrated snow-flecked crest of the Karakorum, somewhere in which lay hidden the Saser pass, which also they would see in the fullness of time. The green little garden, shaded by the willows among the fertile fields, was in vivid contrast to the sun-bathed landscape outside—the desolation of the giant rock hills on either side of the valley, here perhaps two and a half miles wide—hills void of any form of life save in rare places where some rock-born spring foamed down, its course marked by a faint ribbon of green.

In a way, to Alison the country was unexpectedly tame, with its fields and, above all, its rose-bushes scattered everywhere, the bloom practically over now, though here and there still showed the pink splash of occasional blossoms. But it was beyond the usual beat of Europeans, save only the rare travellers to Yarkand and Kashgar—perhaps one or two every second year. And it was altogether other than the Indus valley, Alison saw that; the people were more Mongol than the mixed peoples of the Leh countryside, the little buildings were different, there were chortens with quaint Chinese tops, little tiers of roofs with up-pointing corners.

“Yes—you've got away from the beaten track all right this time, Miss Seymour,” said John, to whom she remarked the differences later in the day. “Any-

way, from the beaten track of the tourist. It must be an event for the local women to see two white women here; did you see them crowding outside the hedge to have a look at you at lunch?"

"I didn't notice a crowd," said Alison; "I saw four and a baby."

"That's a crowd for Panamik. I don't think there are more than a dozen women here. There are two tiny villages a couple of miles on, and that's the end on this road. I think the next village after that is 250 miles farther on, well into Kashgaria. No wonder the Yarkandi is ready to pay fancy prices for a cheap cigarette or a box of matches or a handful of dried apricots when he reaches Panamik, after twenty-five marches over nothing except bare hills. There's a Leh merchant in the serai here coining money, who tells me that he comes out every year for two or three months. His prices are 300 per cent. above even Leh prices, so he must do well. But it is the end of things, or the beginning, according to which way you are moving, and that's always attractive."

"It fascinates me," said Alison. "I frankly don't know why, unless it's the call of the wild hills. But I'm longing to get up a little and see some of the high peaks that are hidden behind these walls. I suppose the walls are high enough, but one misses the snow."

"Anything up to five or six thousand feet above us now—sixteen thousand or so, even these hills above the village. But, as you say, it's the high snow that one misses here. We're so close in against the valley wall that one sees nothing. The sun doesn't reach this garden till well after eight in the morning, and sunrise at present is a quarter to six. There's your kit

coming in now; I see Jim busy pointing out tent sites. We'd better go lend a hand."

To get all the tents into the garden was rather a tight fit, but by putting the servants on the small grass plot outside they managed it in the end.

"Halt-day to-morrow—please observe," remarked Jim, from the comfort of a low Rurki chair after tea. "Five weary days have we tramped this road. To-morrow, therefore, I refuse to tramp anywhere—not even to John's monastery. I shall sit in a chair and develop my films."

"Which, being interpreted, means that he will take the temperature of the water and play with Burroughs and Welcome's manual while I and Ghulam Hussain do the dirty work," said Mary. "Listen to the down-trodden one who recognises his fellowman in the Ladakhi proprietor of one third of a wife! Were it not that I need the photos for an article with which I hope to retrieve my fortune, much diminished thanks to Jim's excessive consumption of sugar on this trip, I would refuse to play—I mean, slave."

"The article will be entitled 'My Adventures among the Free Women of Ladakh,' and will discuss seriously whether Paradise consists, as the working lady of England said in 1917, of 'Thirty-five bob a week separation allowance and no 'usbin',' or whether it is more likely to be found in three husbands, a recognised lover, and an acre or two of irrigated grim-field in the Nubra. It will be contributed to our leading feminist periodical, and Mary's photo will appear at the head of it riding on a yak. Why does everybody who comes to these parts have their photos taken on yaks, and why do those misguided ones who write about it always publish the photos? And why, having published them, do they

not at least take the trouble to explain which is the yak and which the writer? Observe, I am in a captious and carping mood this evening."

"You are—my worser third. Major Espinasse will prescribe for you, lest in despair you take one of your own prescriptions. I suggest a few thousand feet of that hill up there before breakfast."

"‘A hillock a day keeps the doctor away,’ as a certain rotund and rubicund general used to remark to us in Waziristan. There was no keeping the little man in; he used to hop up some hill or other every day. It’s a sad thought what civilisation does to destroy the natural dignified repose of savage man," put in Espinasse, luxuriously stretched full-length on a numdah with two cushions under his head, dreamily watching the smoke of his cigarette. "When the savage feels ill he starves a bit, when he feels better he eats a lot—and in either case he sleeps. Modern civilised man takes Kruschen salts and frantic exercise, and then reads books by physical-jerk specialists, and then takes some more exercise. After that he wonders why he’s too old at forty."

"He doesn’t always," objected John. "Look at Alec Cunningham. He hops about a hill as fast as any of us, and he won’t see sixty again."

"He’s a freak," said Espinasse. "He’s a machine more than a man—a machine for recording glacier movements. No, he’s a real man, I admit that. But the exceptional kind. Did you see him on his way through? He was in front—a long way in front of me on the road; I saw his name in the rest-house books."

"We saw lots of him," said Mary. "He told us all about Hemis and the devil-dancing. He isn’t a

machine at all when he likes to talk. He's a fascinating person really."

"That's only because he knows Alison's people," said Jim. "He wasn't talking for our *beaux yeux* at all."

John looked up at that. Cunningham had said nothing to him about having known Alison's people. It was rather strange, this link between him and Alison—that the man who had always been so much to him and the woman who was becoming such a dominating factor in his thoughts should have some common ground of acquaintance.

"Alison suffers from silence this afternoon," observed Jim. "Wherefore hast not diffusion of words to the mouth same like the rest of us?"

"Rush of thought to the brain instead," retorted Alison. "The reverse process—the two are incompatible."

"Oh, nasty—nasty! Pass the milk—Miau!" was Jim's counter; and the "Miau" was so realistic that he had thereafter to fend off the terriers, who leapt upon him looking for the object to be chased. It was the war-cry with which he set them on, as a rule.

"Let us set aside these personalities and revert again to the question of the morrow," he continued, when clear of the dogs. "It being a rest-day, as I have already enunciated, what does every one propose to do? I do not refer to the workers like me and my assistant, but to the remainder of the idle rich."

"I propose to study," announced Espinasse.

"Whatever are you going to study?" queried John.

"The effect of high altitudes on the human body—at rest."

"You win," said John.

"And our energetic John is, of course, going to study

them—during work”: Jim contrived to adopt an even lazier attitude than he had maintained hitherto.

“He is,” replied John. “Unlike the tourists, I have to earn my living. Miss Seymour is also going to help me in the process. We are going to climb that pimple over there”—he vaguely indicated a few thousand feet of unpleasantly hot and steep-looking hillside of naked granite—“whence I have promised her a view of some notable peaks.”

He was as good as his word. The following morning he dragged a not at all unwilling Alison up a hillside of alternately slipping stones and steep rocks, but when she had got her breath at the top he showed her the peaks he had promised, the great snow peaks hidden from the valley bottom. And Alison found a strange pleasure in having the peaks pointed out to her, as she had found pleasure in having the images in Spitok explained; their value seemed doubled because it was John Marlowe who was her guide. She felt that she would be content to climb any number of hills if only he was there to tell her all about them. His work interested her, too; he had a knack of showing the romantic side of it—a knack that she had remarked he did not display to all and sundry. He had a gift, somehow, of connecting up the present and the past—of putting a human interest into the dry-as-dust details of the work carried out by men, some of them long dead, who had mapped and explored the desolate tracts of mountain country—all around this comparatively fertile valley.

To the world at large, John Marlowe was most eminently a practical man, but to Alison it seemed more and more that she could discern underneath that aspect another one, hidden perhaps for the majority of people,

the aspect of a dreamer. But then very often the two go hand in hand, for after all work is the outcome of dreams; unless you can first picture to yourself the result you want, you cannot hope to achieve anything but mere routine labour.

They returned hot and dusty about tea-time, to be greeted by a scoffing couple of tobacco-consuming idlers, at peace with all the world, Espinasse full of knowledge as to the effects of altitude on the human body—at rest. He explained that the results were not such as could be described with any profit to a lay audience, but that he had gleaned great knowledge on the subject, which some day would doubtless revolutionise ideas on this subject.

Jim Lenox displayed with pride a quantity of films hanging from a string in the verandah of his and Mary's tent.

"Who talked of loafers?" he demanded. "There's a more tangible result than you've got. I might have wasted my day also, but instead—observe."

"Observe," said Mary. "He has twice risen from his chair, once to take the temperature of the developer which I had already taken, the second time was to get a drink after I'd finished developing. He will now, when I have printed them, show the photos to the world as his doing, and later on demand a proportion of anything that editors may give me for an erudite article containing some of these photos, on the ground that he paid for the camera. The capitalist is the curse of modern civilisation, battenning on the workers and fattening on the sweat of the workers' brow."

"What very nasty feeders," said Jim.

CHAPTER XVI

SASER

"IT'S rather like a bit out of a book illustrated by Doré, isn't it, Alison?" said John Marlowe, as he and Alison stood in the dawn looking up the Thalambuti gorge at Umlung four days after the Lenox' arrival at Panamik. They had marched up to Umlung the previous day, and were now awaiting Jim's and Espinasse's appearance from their tents, when these might be struck and loaded for the onward march to Tutuyailak, where they had decided to spend a week or so, visiting the Saser pass and also climbing about the glaciers and peaks all round.

John's use of Alison's Christian name represented the gulf that had somehow been crossed in the four short days since she had arrived from Leh—the result of the weeks before John came over into the Nubra, and of the thought processes that both had been going through ever since. As Alison had said during that evening on the way down from the hill above Panamik, it did seem meaningless to continue addressing each other formally in view of the fact that they had so long before passed out of the stage of being mere acquaintances. And these last four days had somehow brought a still greater advance in the intimacy of their relationship, an unfolding of all the thoughts and ideas that each had so far guarded to themselves. They had, in fact, reached that last delicate stage of friendship between man and woman where so little more may

turn it from friendship to love—to John it was that already, had been so even before Alison came to Panamik. For Alison—still clinging to her prescription of living in the present—it was friendship still. But friendship still. But friendship such as she had always wanted—the real friendship of a man, which can mean so much to a woman like her.

“Yes—it would want a Doré to paint it fairly,” she agreed, looking up the narrow gorge, hemmed in with its sheer walls of limestone, shooting up thousands of feet on either side of the narrow little space of earth hung above the roaring ice-fed torrent where they had spent the night, the only flat space for several miles—a regular halting-ground, littered with little fireplaces of blackened stones, inches deep in the manure of years, and adorned with the skeletons of the uncomplaining ponies who had struggled in there on their last march, and dropped, never to rise again.

“If Espinasse is going to stand by his rule of waiting for the sun to be on his tent before he gets up, we’re here for another three hours. It’s half six now, and the August sun doesn’t hit Umlung until just on nine-thirty. I’ll go and stir him a bit,” said John, looking at his watch.

At that moment, however, Espinasse appeared, and almost simultaneously Jim emerged from the tent opposite.

“Of all the God-forsaken places I’ve ever slept in, this takes the cake,” remarked Jim, lighting a cigarette. “If Tutiyailak’s anything like this!”

“It isn’t,” said John. “The sun gets there at about sixish, and sunset isn’t until something before seven.”

“Thank God!” was Espinasse’s contribution as he pulled up the top of his stockings over his bare knees,

shuffled his shoulders still further into his coat, dragged his pashmina pagri well down over his ears, and sought the comfort of a large boulder until they were ready to start, for the morning was lifelessly cold—the lifeless cold of a mountain gorge whose allowance of sunlight, even in summer, is the minimum. There was no pleasant bite of frost—merely lifeless absence of warmth and a cold, grey light that never changed despite the rising sun, whose light could be seen on the high snow peaks to westward—peaks on the farther side of the Nubra valley, which they had left the day before.

“Where’s Mary?” asked Jim, looking round. “The woman was out of the tent at some godless hour this morning because she said she heard caravan bells. Fancy crawling out of nice warm blankets for that!”

“She’s over there examining Yarkandi ponies and gear and two lady pilgrims,” replied John.

“More copy—more infinitives to unsplit,” sighed Jim, throwing away the butt of his cigarette and hunting for his pipe.

Along the road, which at this point passed some six feet above them, having dropped eight or nine hundred in the last mile and rising as much again round the bend in front—they could see the upper zigzags—were passing a long string of laden ponies and mules, a big caravan heading for Central Asia. On many of the ponies, above the bulky loads of sacks of food and rolls of quilts, were perched figures of men in quaint shapeless pubboos of leather over their felt stockings, fur or felt hats with turned-down brims, wide shapeless chogas girt in at the waists with cummerbunds. Some were traders who had been down from Central Asia to India—several as far as distant Bombay—purchas-

ing merchandise, others were pilgrims returning from Mecca. And it was these last in whom Mary was chiefly interested as she sat perched on a boulder with a note book and a camera—this last, however, useless in the feeble light of that confined gorge.

"They're rather nice to look at," said she to Alison and John, who had gone over to her. "It takes ten or eleven months to get from their homes to Mecca and back, and the greater part of the time is like this—riding along on top of their bedding and bundles on a pony or a mule."

"It's really travel," said Alison. "See that pair—the solemn-looking old man and the woman—his wife, I suppose. They've got everything between them on their two ponies, a funny little bit of a tent—that's the poles, they're only poplar branches—sticking out behind the man's saddle. She's riding on the tent, which is a couple of yards of blue doosootie. And she's got the kitchen tied on at the back of her saddle, while he carries the food-bags. A month's food, I suppose."

"Yesterday, coming up that incline from Sa Soma—it's two thousand feet of steep zigzag—that woman was walking, hanging on to the tail of her pony," remarked John. "They're a stout-hearted lot. They've spent probably half a life-time's savings—or even the whole. Fifteen hundred rupees per head it costs to get to Mecca, so my Ladakhi fellow tells me, and that must take a lot of finding for some of those people."

"It must be good to believe in something so seriously as all that, all the same," said Mary, as she shut up her notebook and got down. The tents were packed now and the ponies being loaded.

And that was what Alison also thought as she watched the long string of ponies climbing their slow

way up the steep incline ahead. These rather quiet, surly-looking people had real convictions and stuck to them after their fashion. Their pilgrimage was no affair of special trains and hotels; it was months and months of hard travel—expenditure of their little all, perhaps—and very fair chances of dying *en route*; she had read somewhere that every one of them carried his or her shroud with them on the road. And looking at them, she felt how very little she had really ever done—how very little discomfort she had in reality undergone for her faith compared to these folk, whom most of her acquaintances at home would have referred to as “heathen.”

That idea persisted subconsciously for a long time during the uphill march to Pangdongtsa and Tutyailak; for it was too narrow to ride abreast, and too unpleasant going to walk, hour after hour of up and down on a narrow, stony track, under giant cliffs in whose rare gorges she saw now and then the sudden white and grey of glaciers, the remains of the side glaciers which had once joined with the great central one sweeping down to the Nubra, vanished hundreds of years ago. Then at last they came out into more open valley, and saw, climbing away to their left, a great sweep of what looked like a dirty rock, split and creviced and hummocked.

“That’s the Mamosthong glacier,” said John; “ten miles it runs back into these hills there. I believe that peak showing over the top of the nearer hills is K32, as it used to be called on the old maps—24,000 feet odd. It goes up sheer at the head of the Mamosthong—which, by the way, means ‘the thousand sheep.’ There’s an old story of a Mongol invasion wiped out on it by avalanches, like a flock of sheep.”

"That would be worth exploring a bit," said Jim, as he cast himself full-length in the shadow of a rock. "Mary, let loose the gorgonzola—otherwise the pork and beans—or whatever the tiffin-basket contains. Glaciers always inspire me—to food."

"There's a nice row of lateral glaciers and some pleasing-looking little peaklets of 19,000 and 20,000 on the west side, which you can't see yet," said John. "That's what I propose we tackle when we've seen the Saser. We ought to do that first while this spell of fine weather lasts."

The main object of the trip was to enable the two women to cross the Saser pass into the upper Shyok. Thereafter the men would climb anything round Tutyailak that took their fancy. And when presently, after another two hours, they had forded the torrent running down from the right to join the fast streams issuing from the ice caves in the Mamosthong snout, followed the steep track opposite to the big glaciers, and at last came to the pleasant little patch of turf called Tutyailak, the party unanimously endorsed John's choice.

"Miles better than behind Panamik," said Jim, looking out at the curving glaciers going up westward from the Mamosthong. "Lots of pleasant peaks fairly easy to get at, instead of having to waste two days groveling up shale-slopes and seeing nothing on the way, like in the Nubra. And from these we ought to see well into the Karakorum—see Gasherbrum and the Bride and Teram Kangri, and all the big fellows."

"But first of all, please, let's go over the Saser. I must see a pass that's made of nothing at all except glaciers," said Mary, strongly supported by Alison. The Khardong had been interesting, but the Saser,

with its evil reputation, its long line of skeletons of horses and mules and donkeys, its intricate nest of glaciers—the Saser, only ten miles farther on, was a lure to them all, even to John, who had already seen it.

Next morning, therefore, with only the lightest of the tents and the minimum of kit, they set out from Tutyailak, leaving the rest of the camp standing. It was a cloudy, cold morning, a return of the bad weather which had marred the three days at Panamik and which had cleared for the last two days. But luck was turning now, and although they had a little snow for the first two hours, when sunrise came it cleared for good, so that they were able to look back from the snout of the Sarthang glacier to a mountain landscape of snow peaks and glaciers—a wide sweep of snow and rock under a cloudless sky.

“High snow really now,” said Alison, as she looked back.

“And a pass of 17,600 feet five miles farther on,” added John. “And it’s really the last serious pass on the Central Asian road, because the Karakorum, which is three more marches in front, is an easy one, although it’s higher. No glaciers, and open practically all the year. We’ll go there some day too.”

He used the plural pronoun without even thinking, so natural did it seem to him now that whatever there was good to see in life would be seen by him and Alison together. Alison noted the use of the plural and ignored the inner feeling that it couldn’t possibly be true—that there was that heritage of hers which must inevitably stand between them. She wanted so much to share everything with this man who had come into her life, who seemed to her to offer all she had ever asked of fate, to go on and on with him through

life—through the life of which this wonderful road seemed a sort of symbol, with its long stretches of barrenness, its oases of green, its high difficult passes, and its wonderful beauty, that compensated if only you had the courage to face the bad bits.

Anyway, for the moment there was the present, and on that she kept her eyes fixed firmly—the present and John—in front of her the rising valley, now ice-barred, with glaciers sweeping in continually from both sides. Gone was the noisy torrent, hidden under the ice rivers, showing only now and then as still lakes of jade water under the sheer ice walls at the glacier snouts—white ice walls with wonderful little green caverns in them. And on either side of the valley great rock cliffs barred with hanging glaciers and snow-slides, at their feet the giant moraines of tumbled rock debris over which the road wound slowly, marked clearly by the ever-thickening trail of bones of ponies and donkeys, and sometimes of little dzos. It was a hard road, thought Alison, for all that it was so beautiful.

And then at last they quitted the travesty of a road in the narrow gorge between the rock cliffs and the great swelling side of the Bongrocheng glacier—last before the actual pass—which rose above them like the hull of a great white ship, barred with lines like the lines of iron plating on a ship, and dotted with holes from which poured out cascades of yellow grey water.

They made their way up the steep rounded side and so came on the fretted surface of the upper glacier, where going was good and easy and skeletons few and far between, for here was little danger of falling and no crevasses, the surface giving good foothold even to worn-out and tired animals.

Before them stretched a long expanse of white; farther ahead a boulder-dotted slope of ice under an expanse of vivid blue sky—the summit of the actual pass itself. To their right showed the upper reaches of the Bongroching—big *névé* beds and tumbled ice-falls sweeping in from between two peaks of purest snow; and behind them, above the long line of laden donkeys—the leading portion of the Yarkandi caravan they had left at Pandongtsa—lay the long sweep of the western Mamosthong glaciers and peaks. It was a landscape of miles and miles of rock and snow—nothing but rock and snow—no vegetation to see now; gone were even the clusters of mountain flowers which had relieved the lifelessness of the lower portion of the road by the Sarthang glaciers and lakes.

But it was wildly beautiful, and Alison forgot about the skeletons—forgot about the animals whose sufferings called up all her pity. She was aware only of the height attained—they were now well over 17,000—aware only of the lure of the heights and the infinite distances, of the call of the peaks, in front of which the first now showed as a rock crest above the curving dip of the pass in front. Aware of all that, and of the fact that she was sharing it with John Marlowe—with the man with whom to share anything somehow made it doubly sweet for her.

The others were well behind; Espinasse claimed to be the slowest man in Asia on a hill, while Jim was for once dutifully walking by Mary's stirrup; Mary, in whom the passion of the author, which is as that of the artist, was struggling with the very vivid realities of insufficient breath and an incipient headache from the combined effects of altitude and glare. Even the faithful Akbar Khan, who generally shadowed John,

was now a dark spot on the white ice behind, suffering for once from "breath that climbs," as the Indian phrase has it. The world was just one vast expanse of vivid blue sky, far snow peaks, glittering white ice all about them, fretted into millions of little pillars that crackled under their feet—herself and John. And it was all she wanted—it was utter content. Gone were the fears, gone was the past—for the moment she was in a vividly absorbing present that took no count either of past or future—as they made their way up towards the pass ahead.

It was too good to last, that she knew, and even now it ceased for a while as they descended from the Bongrocheng down a steep ice-slope where the glacier curved leftward, to make their way down again to the last little bit of the moraine road before reaching the actual Saser glacier, up which they had to struggle to reach the boulder-sprinkled ice of the pass itself, where they came at last to a little hillock of grey rocks heaped up on the ice surface, and cast themselves down to wait for the others.

Before them the ice surface, littered everywhere with boulders brought down from the two uniting glaciers which form the Saser pass, sloped gently downwards, while far in front rose high walls of red and chocolate rock—the walls of the upper Shyok River—even more gigantic than those of the Nubra.

To John also had come supreme content. He was here on his farthest pass—and the highest yet on this wonderful road—alone with Alison, who had climbed it with him foot to foot—here with the woman who had come to be the ideal companion of whom every man dreams—some one who could face the hard bits as well as the soft—some one who could understand

and love the parts of life that he understood, and that, despite his occasional fears, he loved. But there were no fears now—they had somehow gone; no thought of the treachery of the high mountains came into his mind to-day—only the thought of their beauty, their inexplicable charm, their haunting call, that had been his for so long.

They had brought Alison into his life too; had he not taken up this work he would probably never have met her—he would never, perhaps, have come to Ladakh—certainly never as he had done this year. Life was just one delirious combination of sunlight and cloudless sky, marvel of ice and snow, and the one woman. A wild throng of thoughts swept over him, words trembled on his lips, and only the arrival of the other three checked him pouring out then and there to the woman beside him all the hopes and fears he had lived with these late weeks. And Alison sensed it, knew now for certain that what before had been only pleasant dreams was coming reality—reality that must be faced sooner or later, when she would have to make the great decisions.

She was glad, therefore, of Jim Lenox' discordant chant with which he heralded his arrival, helping Mary up the steep little hill; Espinasse was plodding wearily behind them. She somehow felt that she didn't want to hear anything just now—speech would require thought; the fears would surge up again and break all the charm of the moment—break in on the dreams which had become so much. Presently they would have to be broken in upon, facts would have to be faced. But just now she only wanted dreams, and if dreams could not continue, then Jim's babble would be better

than the brutal facts she would presently have to face, and worse still, make John face too.

Jim was at the top of his form that day—heights did not upset his cheerful head; he even contrived to make Mary and Espinasse forget the nasty throbbing brains they possessed as he launched forth his usual string of misquotations to celebrate the day. The world at large, apart from his patients, put Jim Lenox down as a person distinctly wanting in subtlety, but actually he possessed more than average discernment, and for the last four days from behind his smoke-cloud of meaningless babble, watching John and Alison closely, he had come to the conclusion that for the moment the proper use of words was his own proverbial one—to wit, to conceal one's thoughts. He knew what Alison would have to go through very shortly; he was certain that John would take this opportunity, perhaps to-day, perhaps to-morrow, certainly within the next week, to ask Alison for all that Jim Lenox was sure the real Alison would feel she ought not to give. And therefore he felt that the lighter the rest of the atmosphere could be kept, the better and easier for all concerned.

Eventually it was a most cheerful party that he shepherded down the long glacier towards Saser Brangsa on the Shyok River, where they were to pass the night, four miles beyond the pass and some 2500 feet lower.

Presently also John was glad that he had not said anything on the pass. He hated being carried away by impulses, and he had very definitely decided that he would tell Alison everything in his mind when they got back to Tutyailak; and he was a great believer in

doing things according to plan, for in most ways he was a methodical soul.

The one tumble-down stone hut surrounded by little stone walls, travellers' shelters, and the jumbled animal bones of Saser received them in the late afternoon, tropically hot after the cold of the pass above them, for all that the moment the sun set an icy breeze down from the Kumdan glaciers upstream made it imperative to wall the tent-flies with stones, and put on all the warm clothing they possessed.

"Lo! a footstep on the sands of time—I mean the stones of Saser," said Jim as they rode into that metropolis, whose inhabitants—summer only—were two men stationed there to help travellers across the Shyok fords into the Murgo defile, that opened before them on the farther bank—a knife-cut defile in immense hills of black rock seamed with slides, two and three thousand feet high, of disintegrating black shale. "I observe tents—the tents of Cawnpur—the shamianas of Willesden. We have been forestalled by the Amalekite; the blighter has taken up the only bit that looks as if it might be sheltered from the wind. It must be Cunningham, coming back from the Kumdan."

Cunningham it was, on his way back to Leh from his exploration of the Kumdan glaciers, and once more it seemed to Mary that the man was younger than ever as he sat there after dinner talking of his discoveries—talking somehow always as though to Alison, to a rather distraught Alison who this evening did not seem to display the same keen interest in the subject of glaciers which she had hitherto taken. Alec Cunningham noticed it also in the end, and put it down to the fatigue of the day in crossing the pass.

But it was something really quite different that was passing through Alison's mind that evening, as before going to bed she stood for a while outside her tent looking out over the wild desolate scenery of the Shyok valley, whose last tiny hamlet lay close on fifty miles down the river beyond them.

In front of her rose the immense bare rock heights above the Murgo defile, beyond which, high up, showed serrated granite hills, red in the last light of the dying day, for they had dined very early. To her right on the near bank rose a line of snow-flecked summits intensely white against a sky of darkening indigo, which turned to faint rose madder higher up, where above a peak of almost naked fawn-coloured limestone on the opposite bank a great star hung solitary.

Upstream rose a giant of red rock, whose sides were split and crannied into the resemblance of a titanic ant hill, and whose crest was a long snow-field faintly green in the shadow, while farther west ran other peaks of snow, greenish against the colourless western sky.

A cold wind sighed down the valley, the breath of the glaciers upstream, the first two of which she could see clearly in the shadows of the hills to her right, long sweeps of crumpled white pouring out of the formless dark ravines. It was a lifeless landscape—lifeless and desolate beyond anything she had ever seen. And to Alison it somehow seemed appropriate to her that evening—it seemed to show life as life must inevitably be for her when she woke up from the dreams she had let herself indulge in.

She was certain now that John wanted her—presently he would put it all into words. And then she would have to tell him the hard, plain, brutal facts, she would have to sacrifice him and herself. Or if not?

Then she would surely be doing that which in time would lead to even greater sorrow for him, and, what mattered less, for herself.

Why was life so bitterly hard? Why had this fate been laid on her? At the moment to Alison, for all her vivid faith, there came no answer, no thought of a higher plan, no courage to face life in the hope of greater life to come. There was nothing in her but the desolation that seemed reflected in the gaunt landscape about her, now fast darkening into night. No relief anywhere, not even the faint light of a star of hope, such as yonder star now climbing higher into the darkening sky.

She shivered a little at the thought, and turned into her little tent, which had, up to now, been so very dear to her, but which to-night seemed so bleak and cheerless, one little spot of feeble light that only rendered more lifeless the cold gloom of the naked country around.

CHAPTER XVII

TUTYAILAK

THE following morning, as the sun was coming over the hills to eastward of the Shyok, Alec Cunningham and Mary Lenox halted their ponies at the point where the Saser road leaves the rocky slope to the north, to turn on to the glacier moraine, and so up to the east side of the pass—some two long miles of boulders resting on the slowly moving ice.

To their left the snout of the glacier stood up high above the valley in which it runs, a crest of ice above a slope of grey-green detritus, for all the world like a large slice of a giant's almond-ice cake, cut rather badly and balanced in the valley.

In front of them, already moving on to the glacier, were John and Alison, also both mounted this morning. Still farther in front were Jim and Espinasse, the former just dismounting from his rather weary-looking little pony. Behind them was the slowly moving string of their baggage ponies and servants, while still farther back was Alec Cunningham's rather bigger convoy, in charge of Darweza Khan. The perfect weather of the day before was holding well, and not the least cloudlet marred the vivid blue of the sky above the ice-slopes and the snow-flecked peaks in front.

Mary, whom a good night's rest had restored—she was acclimatising now, and sleeping at 15,000 feet was no longer the trial it had been to her the first night

under the Khardong pass—had ridden up from Saser with Cunningham, and they had talked somewhat of the couple in front.

"Yes—very great friends indeed," said Mary. "They have such a lot in common, and tastes that are not perhaps altogether the ordinary ones. Alison really is interested in exploration and wild places, and that, of course, is John Marlowe's life."

"More than friends, even, I was thinking yesterday," replied Cunningham. "At least, it seemed to me more than that—to my mind there was something deeper. I know John Marlowe as well as any man, and although, of course, I do not know Miss Seymour to the same extent, still I have seen a lot of her in the last three months, and I knew her mother, whom in mind she greatly resembles. I cannot think of two people who would stand a better chance of happiness."

"Marriage is not always that, though," said Mary, as she urged her pony on again, on to the narrow track over the boulders.

"No—alas, Mrs. Lenox. But it could be—should be—the best thing in the world—the dearest, the most ideal companionship to hearten a man through life—the finest spur to brave work that was ever invented. And I think that for those two it might be like that. There is big work before John Marlowe if he follows the line he has begun; there is still big work left for the explorer in spite of modern civilisation—aeroplanes, and so on. But perhaps an explorer's wife would miss many of the lesser things that other women have, and so, if she is to be happy, must be of fine metal like Miss Seymour seems to me to be."

"I was going to reprove you for taking only the man's point of view when you began," said Mary. "I

won't now, for the last words you said. Alison would make just that fine type of wife. But whether it comes to anything is another matter. And I think it will rest with her, for I am sure that John is very much in love."

The bad path put an end to conversation for a while, but as Mary rode on she wondered rather about Alec Cunningham, bachelor, who put forth such ideas about marriage. She wondered why he was not married, thought of his life, and came to the conclusion that he had probably been deeply in love at one time. Perhaps it was John's mother; but that could hardly be, for she was a widow—had been one since John was a boy. Perhaps it was Alison's mother; and at that thought her imagination got the upper hand, and she began to weave romances in her head. That was obviously it—he had been in love with Alison's mother, and she had died. Hence his great interest in Alison, and now in John and Alison.

She was on the verge of discussing the whole matter more fully—talking of what might happen—of Alison's past life. Then she thought better of it: Cunningham was John's friend primarily, and the rest might be merely her imagination. But now she felt somehow a greater friendliness for this rather lonely man; perhaps he was looking forward to a sort of vicarious happiness in seeing the son of his greatest friend—John had told her that—and the daughter of some one who had certainly been an equally great friend—perhaps—somehow Mary felt surely—more than a friend, finding what he himself called the most ideal companionship in the world—the companionship that she and Jim had found, but which so few seem to achieve.

She agreed that Alison and John might well find that, and if Alison did take this chance—if she did break away from these rigid ideas of hers—she would work for that happiness all her life; of that Mary was sure—work as she, Mary, had worked, seeking always to know her man better, to help him live his life in the way best suited to him. And Mary felt that success was hers—more and more in return for her labour. She felt sure that Alison could do the same. But then, if she did accept John—he was certainly going to ask her soon—would that conscience of hers ever let her be really happy?

And that was the very question which Alison was posing to herself as she rode up to the pass and on to the crest, where her pony stopped for breath without any urging. It was a question that had posed itself all night and still persisted, and continued to persist subconsciously all the way down on the farther side towards Tutyalak.

It was a thought that forced itself particularly keenly on her when John pointed out a rather hog-backed snow-hill above the distant camp and asked her to climb it with him when he and the other men came back from their proposed expedition to the peak above the Mamosthong, which they had christened "Droog peak," from its resemblance to a southern Indian hill-fort—on a gigantic scale and all in snow, of course, instead of black rock, but nevertheless very like a South Indian droog.

"One has to give temporary names of sorts to keep places in one's head," said John. "That hill I call Rose Peak; there's a big clump of wild roses still in flower at the foot of the spur one goes up. I must have another day with the theodolite up there before we go

down to the Nubra again, and that will be the only chance."

Of course she was ready enough to go—she who felt ready to go anywhere with John. But she felt that it was much more than the view that he wanted to show her, and when, the following morning, the three men started off on their two-day expedition, she was more certain than ever, for she knew somehow that John would not let her go back to Panamik without saying what he had been on the brink of saying on the pass the day before. And she was still as utterly undecided as to what she would say as she had been all these last weeks—ever since she had let herself dream of what life might hold for her and for a certain John Marlowe who had come to her among the hills that she had always loved so strangely.

Alec Cunningham probably realised something of her thoughts when he went on next day, on his way back to Leh, sometime after the other three men had started off. It may have been that which prompted him to say to Alison, who had walked a little way down the hill with him to get another view of the Mamos-thong, that he hoped if ever she had need of help in this country—help such as a man like him might be able to give—she would remember him. It would be such a pleasure to him to be able to do any little thing for her whose mother and aunt had been the friends of his youth.

The three men returned on the third day—Jim Lenox triumphant at the fact that he was still faster up a hill than John for all that John had been in training, so to speak, for two months now; John doggedly insistent on the fact that he was a safe and honest plodder, whereas Jim was a danger to the world at

large. Espinasse announced that the view was magnificent, the height—somewhat over 19,000—more than enough, and that he was more than ever convinced that the finest view of any hill is that to be obtained from a Rurki chair in the comfort of one's camp.

"Well, you can have that one to-morrow, George," said Jim Lenox, as he restfully surveyed the distant peak up which he and John had dragged the unfortunate Espinasse—surveyed it with the comfortable, soothing pride that comes to every man who has climbed a reasonable height. "You can have that view in the intervals of studying the human body at rest. To-morrow I am going to stay at home and assist Mary pressing plants—another of her side-lines—something to do with copy. She takes them back and finds out the names, and then they fill up so many pages in the sob-stuff parts, where the luscious-lipped heroine is basking in the arms of the strong silent man amid a framework of astralgea or some such coloured blooms. The correct flower phraseology adds thousands of copies to the sales, I'm told."

"I didn't know you were a botanist, Jim," said Espinasse.

"He presses flowers better than any ten volumes of the Encyclopaedia," explained Mary. "All I have to do is to put the flowers between the sheets in the wrapper, place a rug over them, put Jim on top, with lots of food and tobacco handy, and the deed is done. That's what he calls helping."

"And Alison and I are going to climb that hill over there," said John, with the air of one who expects surprised expostulation.

"I refuse to be astonished at anything either John

or Alison do," said Jim. "Astonishment is one's tribute to the unexpected. To hear of John and Alison arranging to climb hills on a rest-day is the utterly expected and commonplace."

But neither to John nor Alison was next day's climb in the least commonplace, for all that it might be expected. When Alison set out at dawn with John, Akbar Khan, and three coolies laden with survey instruments and the tiffin-basket, it was with a feeling that this was to be the climax of the very wonderful thing that had come into her life. Even now she was not decided as to what she was to do if, as she was certain now would be the case, John asked her for the greatest gift a woman can give—her love and herself for all time. She felt that when the time came she would know what would be the right thing to say, and so up to the end she left it at that. She would take this one more day of happiness and leave the future to look after itself.

In that spirit she set out up the gentle slope from the camp to the foot of the steep rocky spur up which they were to go, past the great bush of wild roses all in bloom, and when John stopped to pick a bunch of the fragile pink blossoms to give her, she felt it was only just what she had expected would happen. They were the first flowers he had ever given her, and they were a symbol—those slightly scented dog-roses that seemed to her so essentially connected with the high hills which both of them loved so much.

Equally expected and familiar seemed the long steep climb before they reached the snow level, where the steep hillside flattened out to a long gentle slope of snow, the upper part of a snow-bed above a small hanging glacier where they stopped to put on the rope.

Far below them she could make out the little camp on the patch of green turf above the racing torrent. Eastward at about the same height as themselves showed the glaciers of the Saser pass, while to north lay the long expanse of the Mamosthong glacier, and above it, over the high ice-wall at the head, stood up the great snow-clad peak which John had told her had been christened Mount Lion Couchant by Neve when he climbed the ice col below.

To the right of that towered the far higher peak of K32, a snow-clad peak above a three-thousand-foot precipitous wall of naked rock. To the left showed the long line of peaks and glaciers westward of the Mamosthong, and still more to the left one of the Nubra peaks hung sharp-cut against the cloudless sky.

It was a landscape of the real high snows, and when they went forward again, roped now and John leading, it was an experience she had never had before—moving over this white surface—probably the first who had ever trodden it, the first people to climb this mountain which had stood there since the Himalayas broke their way up through the waters. It was a limestone peak that had been formed æons of time ago under the depths of the primeval sea and been pushed up, to stand in solitary grandeur until to-day, when it was to be the setting for the love-story of a man and a woman.

At the far end of the crest, on a flattish summit of snow above a precipitous drop of nearly 2000 feet, John halted and presently was busy with the theodolite taking a round of angles. A few yards farther back on the reverse slope the Ladakhi coolies were preparing their midday food, mixing the suttoo flour in the little wooden bowls. Alison settled down on the farther side where Akbar Khan had put out the tiffin-

basket on a safe stretch of level snow. She sat there watching him putting out the plates and the two thermos flasks, and then gazed over the distant Saser pass, now below her horizon, for the dome was well over 18,500 feet, the highest point she had ever reached in her life.

And then came John and food, which she ate, it seemed to her, mechanically. Akbar Khan had been sent back to where the coolies were. It was cold, but not too cold, for there was no wind and the sun was intensely hot, so that she was content to lie there, on the mackintosh Akbar Khan had spread for her in the trough of the snow hollow, and listen to John talking.

The unfluent John was fluent to-day as he talked first of the snows, then of the work he was doing, then of himself and life, and Alison heard of Ethel Carruthers and of John's fears of the mountains, and of all that inner side of him so much of which she had learnt before without definitely hearing it in words.

Thus at last love came again in visible guise to Alison Seymour—for the second time, but it seemed infinitely greater to her now, in this setting of the great hills and the high snows—came as she had foreseen it would—love that her whole being cried out for more and more—the more, perhaps, since it seemed to her that it was to be denied.

“And so that's me, Alison—you see, me and the work and the bogies. Will you take them all, Alison—Alison, dearest—take them all and make the most of them—make us into something fit for you—dearest of all women?”

John's voice was very soft, and not at all the usual staccato utterances he was given to. John himself

was also very near and coming nearer, and Alison had no farther advanced to her decision. All she was aware of was the intense longing to take everything he offered—to take and to give. And so before she had resolved anything she knew only that she was in John's arms, and that her rather frost-cracked lips were in process of being brought to life very violently.

And then, for the moment, Alison Seymour's conscience vanished altogether, as she let herself drift with this sweetness that had been so long denied her. She felt now that she could never let John go—that she wanted him—that she would risk everything in the world to gain happiness here, to escape the loneliness that had hung so long over her life—to seek the joy that comes to woman in giving joy to the man who loves her.

But for a time only, for presently the other Alison came up again, a sober Alison who gave back confidence for confidence, who spoke plain words about the heritage that was hers; that would be the heritage of the children who might come to them in the fulness of time. And John listened gravely, passion stilled for the time, as he realised what life must have been to this woman he loved.

"And so you see I can't say yes, can I, John?"

"Why can't you, Alison? It's just you I want, nothing else. I don't want the future; I just want you to share life with, to share everything. And if some day something happens, well, we shall have had all the good time to remember and the ultimate future to look forward to."

Then Alison temporised again—said that they would wait a little—that she would write definitely to him when she got back to Leh; and John dealt with her

further arguments in a masterful way that the Alison Seymour who had walked alone through life found most altogether convincing, for to the really proud woman like Alison surrender is perhaps the sweetest of unexperienced pleasures.

At last time drove them down again—to the roped passage of the snow-bed and the long descent over the rock spur which they passed now so quickly—too quickly, it seemed to Alison, since it meant return to camp and the world and life as it is and not as it might be—such very different things.

Thus in the afternoon they came back to the idle rich—Jim lazing luxuriously on a numdah, Espinasse sunk in a Rurki chair with a box of cigarettes at his elbow, Mary in Gilgit boots and a fur coat busily writing up her diary. But for once the idle rich did not mock at them; Jim merely called for tea, and Mary became solicitous in seeing that Alison changed her things, so that it was a long time before the two women appeared again.

Only Jim and Espinasse exchanged long looks and short words as they watched John going to his tent to take off his heavy boots.

“God knows,” said Jim Lenox at last.

“And He won’t split,” completed Espinasse. “Anyway, whatever happens I hope they’ll both be happy. Miss Seymour’s a top-hole sort, and old man John’s off the top shelf. It’s a damned shame that she should have that over her head.”

And then he lit another cigarette and resumed his study of the effects of altitude on the human body at rest, until the women came out of Alison’s tent, and the conversation turned to the usual bantering talk of

any meal which Jim Lenox happened to grace, or, as his wife preferred to term it, disgrace.

But that night John Marlowe did not sleep, and it was always his boast that the higher he camped the better he slept. He lay awake thinking over the day—thinking over all Alison had said to him. He could see her point of view, of course; John was not narrow-minded, and Alison had talked simply and frankly. At the same time he could see his own very vividly. And the facts were that he loved Alison and Alison loved him—that he wanted Alison and Alison wanted him. Therefore, what the devil had future generations and the world of to-morrow got to do with the business at all? The sooner Alison could be got to see that the better, and John hoped very greatly that she would see it before they left Panamik.

So during the next two days' marches back to Panamik, he did his honest best to get her to see it, and John could be persuasive enough when he really put himself to it. But for all that—the older, stronger Alison—the Alison that had fought with happiness in the war years, fought with happiness and won, to her own sorrow—was too strong to give way.

The only concession to the other Alison—the Alison who claimed a life of sweetness and joy—was that she temporised, she put off the final decision, she would think over things again and presently she would write. And with that John had to be content as he watched the Lenox party setting out from Panamik on their way back to Leh, while he and Espinasse stayed on in the Nubra. It was small consolation to John who, normally slow, patient, and methodical, was now all on fire for quick decision—for decision in the only sense that seemed to him sane and proper, for

Alison to say that she would come into his life to stay, that she would be with him always, that she would share the work and the play, that she would embody for him the ideal which had been his for so long. Surely that was what he and she had been put together for in these mountains, which once he had feared, but which had now brought him promise of such great joy to come, and which he was sure now he would never really fear again.

Somehow as he looked after their caravan fading into the distance down the long, stony expanse below the Vaskin hill, he felt that some day it would all come right, that Alison would come to see reason, that she would understand that her real ultimate happiness lay, not in loneliness, but in taking him. That even the fear of possible madness—how he hated using the word in connection with Alison—would be lessened by marriage, that love was surely the greatest insurance towards sanity that any one could have.

Then he turned back towards his camp and the work, determined that this season's work should be the best he had ever done, because of Alison who had marched up to Ladakh with him, and climbed the passes and looked out with him over the high snows—Alison, who would presently come to share it all with him fully and for all time.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALISON IN THE SHADOWS

“**W**HERE’S Alison?” queried Jim as they turned back towards the tents at Khalsar two days after having left John and Espinasse at Panamik. They had been for a short stroll with the terriers watching a Tankse caravan of yaks coming into the camping-ground below where their own tents were pitched.

“Lying down, I think,” said Mary. “About the best thing for her just at the moment. It was a hot march in from Sumur, and that, on top of all the rest, has pretty well tired her out. I was right in what I thought, and she told me all about it this morning after you’d gone to the Santanling monastery to operate on that blind monk. John did propose to her at Tutyailak, and now she’s trying to think things out and decide what she’s going to do.”

Jim whistled. “Poor old Alison! She’s in for the devil of a time now, if I know her at all. It’s going to undo all the good that Ladakh has done her up to date unless she can settle it quickly. It’s no good my talking to her about it, of course; on things of this description I’m the heathen materialist. I should say the right thing at the wrong moment the whole time. If there was only herself to consider, all would be easy. But she’ll be fashing her head about the future, about the next generation. That Church of hers is a

weird and wonderful show, the way it contrives to keep most of its people in hand on these matters."

"No one's going to be able to help her in this, Jim. She's got to fight it out by herself. We can only look on and make things as easy as possible in every other way. She's right and she's wrong. I don't think that she should risk bringing potential lunatics into the world, to put it bluntly and truthfully—although somehow I can't believe that she or her children could ever be anything but sane. But that is not a reason for her not marrying, provided the man is satisfied. And I think John wants Alison. He's not marrying for a family to carry on a title. I've told her that before, but it's not a line I can follow up again. She's adamant on that point, and I call it wrong of her. Wholesale race suicide to keep up a false standard of luxury is one thing, but the application of modern scientific knowledge to cases like hers—to prevent present and future unhappiness—is quite another. That's the way I look at it. But oh, I do wish things could come right!"

"They'd be a good couple, too," added Jim, filling his pipe. "They're both fond of the wandering life, and John's trade rather demands that. She has sufficient sense of humour to counteract John's tendency to seriousness, and his general practical common-sense would serve to pull her off the highfalutin perch she is inclined to get on to when she's off colour."

The tents were now near enough to put a stop to their conversation, and when, later, Alison—a rather worn-looking Alison—emerged from her tent at the clatter of plates by which Ghulam Hussain always indicated tea being ready, she found them both entirely matter-of-fact, Jim absorbed in the *Weekly Times* and

Mary busy with her typewriter, writing up an article on Ladakhi life as seen in the Shyok-Nubra area.

They were comforting company, reflected Alison, as she looked at them—Jim with his characteristic conversation, his flow of words which sometimes meant nothing and sometimes quite a lot—and Mary, who could be so eminently consoling and helpful if need be. She was very grateful indeed that they were with her at this particular juncture.

Jim looked up as she sat down on the opposite side of the camp table and then called loudly for tea.

"I have expounded modern surgery in the benighted parts of the world in large quantities this morning, Alison. I have removed three cataracts from two aged lamas and a still more aged lady, who can now see once more after a fashion. Whether the lady's husbands will be grateful now that she can count the money they bring back home after transporting our baggage here is another matter. By way of a fee, the Skushok himself took me round the monastery and presented me with a picture done by himself—apparently he studied art at Lhasa. He has four cakes of colours and two moulting brushes, and his pictures are marvellous considering. The utterly conventionalised style of the East, of course, but he has a sense of colour. He further allowed me to acquire merit by giving him a nice new Koh-i-noor pencil."

"And now presently you can do some more acquiring of merit," said Mary, handing him a cup of tea. "There's an old dame waiting outside with a large hole in her arm. The poor soul fell off an apricot tree and spiked herself on a branch. I said you'd dress it for her after tea."

"I hope you added that at her age she shouldn't

go in for forbidden fruit, and then she wouldn't fall off apricot trees. I was going to take my gun and murder a chikor or two—it not being the season—only no one ever comes here to shoot chikor, so we might as well have a decent lunch for the pass. I'm sick of tinned things, and cold goat or sheep is infernally tough. A couple of nice chikor is the proper kind of roadside lunch. All right, I'll tie up the old dame directly after tea. Any offers to come and see me put salt on the wily chikor's tail?"

"Not me," said Mary. "I am inspired at the moment by the sight of Ladakhis cooking sausages. I write an epoch-making article."

"Where are you going?" asked Alison.

"Along the edges of these fields and on to that low hill over there. Last time we were here I heard a lot of them calling in the morning."

"Well, I'll walk over with you as far as the hill and then wait there. You can pick me up on the way back. I want to get a sunset photo of these hills on the other side."

But when three-quarters of an hour later Alison, from the top of the little hill, watched Jim depart along the edge of the newly harvested grim-fields, she did not take the photographing business as seriously as usual. She wanted to be alone, and since her tent was hot—there were no trees high enough for shade at Khalsar—she had taken the opportunity of accompanying Jim part of the way.

From the point to which she had climbed she looked out across the river to the high peaks above Satti village on the opposite bank of the Shyok. It was a savage enough landscape, the towering hills of rock bare of the least verdure, flecked here and there at the

very summits with the last traces of snow, hills almost orange now in the light of the setting sun. The river poured down—a brown turbid expanse of racing water in the midst of a wide expanse of sand, which, however, farther on, was relieved by thickets of tamarisk. Far away upstream showed higher peaks of snow, the hills on the edge of the Nomad country south of the great Pangkong lake. The immensity of it all was soothing to Alison at the moment; it brought back a little of the peace which she had known these late months, and which had now suddenly vanished.

She looked to her left, but the view there was cut off by the nearer hills—low, mud-coloured hills dotted at one point with some tumbled-down chortens where ran the white ribbon of the old road, now abandoned in favour of the modern one cut in under the cliffs of the river-bank. Somewhere beyond that lay hidden the Nubra valley and the garden of Panamik, where John and Espinasse were still in camp, unless they had already moved on, as they intended to do so soon as the Nubra River sank with the approach of autumn.

And beyond that again the snows of the Saser pass where John had brought things to this crisis that must now be faced. No more could it be question of living for the moment—that philosophy would serve only for the present; but since the future is always and at each moment supplanting the present—well, it wouldn't serve at all.

She tried to balance things out once again, as she had tried to balance them every evening for the last week and more. It was easy enough to array the facts—it was the decision that was so cruelly difficult.

The facts were simple—John Marlowe loved her and wanted her. And she knew now that she had learnt

to love him more than she had ever loved any one—that she longed to give him everything—she longed to face life with him—to share the future—the good, the bad, the sorrow, the joy. And she felt also that she could help him so much, she was sure of that; she would work, and she could work, so that he would make the most of life, the most of himself. She could understand his ideals, his fears; she could sustain the ones and help him fight the others as she was sure no other woman ever could. His life was a wanderer's life, and as such distasteful to the majority of women, who cling to the shelter of civilisation, the shelter of a permanent home. But she had just that gift of the wanderlust, she could make home for a man in a tent in the wildest of surroundings. That she recognised; no credit was due to her for the fact—it was simply a gift that she had been given perhaps for this very purpose—a gift that she knew well is not given to all women, is granted to few indeed.

For herself, she wanted him intensely. Never before had she met a man with whom she felt she could indeed be so completely one, who could share her thoughts, could share her hopes, could make life something so very perfect.

These were the facts, and they were easy enough to understand. But behind them all loomed the shadows of the past and of the future. If marriage was that, and only that—if there were only the two, the man and the woman, to think of, and if John were ready and willing to take the risk of perhaps losing her presently, of being chained to a wife confined in an asylum—that also would be simple. She herself would be glad to take the risk if the cases were reversed. Even a few years' happiness snatched from time would be well

worth any price that one might have to pay temporarily later on.

But there were other factors. Marriage might involve children—in the normal course of things would involve them. And that altered everything. What right had she to bring children into life with a heritage of terror hanging over them, the heritage that had been left to her?

Then once again she toyed for an instant with the thought as to whether there need be children. Others far more happily situated than herself decided they need have none—that lack of money, other calls of all sorts, ruled out the question of children, and—well, there were no children. So simple a solution. If she didn't marry him there would be no children, and no one would suggest that she was not doing her duty in life. She would be merely depriving herself and him of the happiness to which surely they were entitled—the right of man and woman to help each other through life—to make life something sweeter than it otherwise is.

And then came up the thought of what was right and what was wrong—all the power of the faith which she had of her own free choice embraced twelve years before, and which had been her consolation and her stand-by ever since. That faith was everything to her; she knew that if she lost that, she would lose all else that glorified life. Of that also she was convinced. Even love itself would not be worth having if her faith had gone.

But to Alison, her faith and her Church were synonymous terms that could not be divorced. And her Church laid down very clearly that certain things were permissible and certain others were not. Among all

the sweetness—and she had found no sweetness comparable to it in any other faith—there was a certain rigid something of steel that said “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” To Alison it was the same voice still speaking as had spoken nineteen hundred years before in Galilee; she believed that in listening to her Church she listened to the voice of Him who founded it—which, however, meant also to the voice of Him who is infinite love.

To many people it is easy to take what they like in a faith, and to discard the rest as being mere human additions. But not so with Alison—it was all or nothing. Either you believed the whole, including the parts that personally you found hard or unpleasant to believe, or you believed nothing, and accepted nothing. She was not, as are many women in all religions, ready to be influenced by one or other preacher in whom they think they have discovered the very spirit of their Church; she had common sense enough to be able to dissociate the human side from the divine—the minister was human, the Church was divine. But where it was a question, as in this, of the teaching of the Church as a whole, then, felt Alison, it was nothing human that spoke—it was the voice of Him who said “unless a man leave all for My sake, he cannot be My disciple.”

And since now she was as convinced as she had ever been that she and those like her had no right to bring further suffering into the world, that the production of children demanded healthy minds and bodies, that it was not, as some people like to say, a question of populating heaven with souls, but a question of populating the earth with healthy human beings capable of doing the work for which the world is made—since she

felt that, the question resolved itself into a choice between John, between her own happiness, that is, and her Church, which is to say between John and Him who had made both John and her and all the world.

Thus reasoned Alison, in a fashion which perhaps is increasingly rare in the world of to-day. Many would call her fanatical and foolish; others, like Mary and Jim, would disagree entirely with her premises and yet support her decision—those, that is, who understand that the true judgment of right and wrong must be the state of mind which prompts the action and not the action itself.

And then, while she sat there looking down the Shyok with unseeing eyes as the great mountains darkened from vivid red and orange to soft greys and blues, another thought came upon her, and one that of its essence showed that she could not fairly be called fanatical. It was the doubt as to whether she was really right in what she thought. Was it not a question of being good at some one else's expense—a fine and subtle form of selfishness, that finds expression so often? There is one's duty to God—is there not also one's duty to one's neighbor? John wanted her, and to Alison it seemed—an exaggerated idea, perhaps, natural to any one deeply in love—that he wanted her very greatly—that she could make all the difference to him in life—that his happiness and sorrow were in her hands, had been put there for some reason.

Once before she had found herself in the same situation, and though looking back on it she was sure that the cases were not truly parallel; this love for John was something finer and greater, of that she was sure in her present mood—as sure as any human being can ever be in such things. And she had acted as she felt even

now that she ought to act again, and as a result—the man had gone out of life to death.

Was that right? Had it not rather been selfishness on her part? She had taken the fine road, made the great sacrifice, but had it not been at some one else's expense? That thought would not have occurred to the really fanatical mind, to whom everything is so crystal clear and well defined in such a tiny compass—am I all right? But to Alison it was a very torturing thought, and the facts that had been so clear resolved themselves once more into a kaleidoscope, offering no definite pattern, indicating no clear line of action.

She had promised herself that she would do nothing definite until she got back to Leh, and even then not at once. She would strive and pray to get her mind really clear—to seek light as to where her duty truly lay. Then and then only would she write the letter, which John in the Nubra would be looking for, as each fortnight the mail-runner he had arranged for would jog into his camp with the khaki haversack; that was John's link with the outer world, and now with that nearer and far dearer world in Leh.

Jim Lenox was a discerning individual, and so when he came back to where Alison was sitting he made no remarks as to the kind of photographs she had taken. The camera case was lying exactly as she had put it down, and the stand had clearly not been unstrapped. Instead, he talked gaily of the habits of the chikor, and offered her a selection of feathers from the breast of the largest of the three birds he had secured.

She was more than ever grateful to both Jim and Mary for the way they behaved; there was understanding sympathy that made itself felt at every point, and

yet there was no attempt to discuss or to offer advice, however well meant.

But it was a poor night, as had been its predecessors, and as were also its successors in the camp at Khardong at the pulo under the pass, where from her tent door she looked up at the steep slope of glacier, now almost bare of snow, up which would lie their road of the morrow. And that night under the pass she felt very lonely and desolate. It was a clear night, but the scene was somehow eerie, with the hard black shadows of rock and the fainter white expanses of snow high above them on either side of the pass.

It was cold, too, for all that it was August, and there was a wind which was somehow uncanny. She thought of John in the Nubra: shortly he would be farther on camping on the immense glaciers north of the Saser. And she knew that then he would be lonely and perhaps afraid, and was glad that Espinasse would be with him. Not that his fears would have the slightest effect on his work; the mere fact of fearing something would to John be merely a reason for doing it the better. But it was all a strain, and she longed so much to be able to help. Yet it seemed that instead of being able to help she would now only have to make things harder for him.

Then she thought of possible accidents, of avalanches and crevasses and stone shoots, and the other incidentals which go with the high mountains. And somehow with that came back the picture of the other man, leading the last remnants of his company in a hopeless effort to attack through uncut wire; she had heard about it from his subaltern, who had fortunately had his leg smashed while actually climbing out of the assault trench and so came back to England.

Perhaps if things had been otherwise he would not have gone on; none would have blamed him; they spoke of him as brave beyond the common run, but judged he had made a mistake upon that occasion—that it was throwing away life.

Then she wondered if perhaps the same thing would happen again, and John would never come back from the snows—that since life could hold none of the sweetness he thought he had found at last, that he would cease to care, cease to fear, and so neglect the precautions that he ought to take. And for that again she was grateful that Espinasse was with him for the present, since, so long as Espinasse was there, for his sake John would have to be careful.

Next morning, from the pass, instead of the cloudless sky they had expected and the view of all the far Nubra peaks—ivory against the distant sky—was nothing but mist and cloud and far-off rain hiding all the mountain world. Before them, over Leh, was also low threatening cloud that broke before the afternoon was far advanced, so that when they finally reached the bungalow it was in a steady drizzling rain with all the hills hidden under banks of leaden cloud, and even Jim's usual care-free conversation suffering a temporary eclipse.

CHAPTER XIX

ALISON HAS TEA WITH ALEC CUNNINGHAM

DARWEZA and Murteza Khan were very busy on the afternoon of the 8th September in Alec Cunningham's camp in the Residency garden at Leh. Both were extra spotlessly clothed, and Murteza had a blossom stuck in his small round pagri and another behind his ear in his newly oiled, bobbed locks. Darweza, who was more Spartan-minded, as a rule ignored such frivolities.

Darweza was watching the cook, with whom he now had a perfect understanding, if not exactly a liking. The cook was putting the finishing touches to a sugared cake of his own make. Thereafter Darweza turned to contemplating the golden hue of certain scones which he had made with his own capable hands.

Murteza was occupied laying a tea-table under the shade of a large tree close to the garden wall, from whence one got a perfect view of Mount Sacrifice and all the great hills across the Indus, for the day was cloudless—in striking contrast to the one when Alison and the Lenox' had returned to Leh ten days before. The table was covered with a spotless cloth and gay with a large bowl of flowers—a Chinese bowl that many connoisseurs would have paid large sums to obtain, a souvenir of one of Cunningham's Central Asian journeys, a souvenir that had a long history connected with a certain Chinese Amban of Kashgaria.

Cunningham, who ought to have been at work in his tent, oblivious of such things as meals, was, on the contrary, very occupied, going in and out to see that all was in order, putting out trays of sweets and biscuits with his own hands, delicacies purchased at fabulous prices at the only shop in Leh where such things could be found, articles that seldom graced Cunningham's rather simple repasts.

At the gate Aziz Muhammad, also in his best clothes, was on duty waiting to give early information of the visitor's arrival, for there was evidently to be only one—the table was laid only for two people.

When you have led a life like Alec Cunningham's you may perhaps be pardoned if you lay strong stress on anniversaries. Life for him had been mostly a long succession of years of work with little to differentiate the days and months and years. Such anniversaries as he held to dated very far back into the past. And this one, 8th September, was the dearest—it was most specially his Dream Lady's day.

But to-day it was to be rendered doubly joyful by the presence of her daughter. He hoped also that it might be gladdened by something still more. He had not watched John and Alison for nothing, and he was sure now that there was a great deal more than mere friendship in that quarter.

His belief had been farther fostered by his talks with John, by the interest that Alison took in everything connected with the man who to Alec Cunningham was almost a son, and lastly, by what he had observed at Saser. And now Alison had asked if she might come and have a talk with him this afternoon. Surely she was going to tell him something of very real interest. Alec Cunningham felt the more flattered

at the idea that of herself she was going to confide in him.

He wore a store suit for the occasion, with a rather old-fashioned stiff double collar and irreproachable tie. Further, he had a flower in his button-hole. It was well, on the whole, that Mrs. Dashwood was not in Leh. The dogs had been bathed that morning in honour of the day, and Boris rejoiced in a new collar of Darweza's making—needless to say, dog-collars are not to be bought in Leh.

Even at Alec Cunningham's age—perhaps even more at the later years—to the average simple-minded man there is considerable pleasure in the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* meal with an attractive woman, and it was not an experience that often came Cunningham's way. So altogether you can imagine that there was an air of festivity about his usually rather severe-looking camp, and even the dogs seemed to have absorbed something of the expectant atmosphere. They kept on wandering between the kitchen, Cunningham's tent, the tea-table, and Aziz Muhammad plainly waiting for some one or something at the gate.

Cunningham looked at his watch; he was a model of punctuality himself, like so many men who lead lonely lives. It was just four o'clock, and a minute or two later the deep joyous bay of the dogs indicated that Alison had arrived, and he could hear her voice as she bade them be good and not spoil her frock with their large paws. They had taken to her very greatly indeed, these two dogs, who rarely ever saw a woman.

Cunningham had been worried by Alison's looks when she returned to Leh; there were drawn lines in the face and shadows under the eyes, that spoke to

sleepless nights, and to-day also she was not looking her best, though better than she had seemed the previous day when she had asked to come and see him. But then Cunningham was not very versed in the feminine side of life, and he did not know the pains that Alison had taken to make herself look nice for this visit.

To Cunningham it was wonder of wonders to sit there watching her pour out the tea from the quaint Chinese tea-pot in the padded wicker-basket, another souvenir of Kashgaria that had travelled with him many thousand miles—to watch her gestures, seeking ever those little inherited traits—to listen to her voice, catching now and then an inflection that took him straight back through the years—to feel almost that the Dream Lady had come back again and was even now sitting at his table, as she ought to have been if only life had been kinder.

Alison, of course, knew that his friendliness to her was on account of the friendship that he had borne her mother, but she had no littlest inkling of how deep that feeling really was. But even though she was worried beyond measure in her own thoughts, she realised that her very presence was giving a great pleasure to the man opposite—the man who was older than her mother would have been and yet bore such a strange air of youthfulness. Had she known more she would have understood that much of that youthfulness was due to her presence.

She wasn't in the least hungry, but she had to eat—they had evidently taken such pains to have a really appetising tea for her. Even the two Pathans seemed anxious lest she should not eat enough; she could see Darweza hovering in the background when the scones

appeared, and understood when Cunningham explained that they were of his making.

"He always insists on making these scones if any one comes to tea with me. He doesn't profess to cook, though he has cooked for me when the cook has been sick, or, as once happened, deserted me at a very awkward time. But he likes making little frills like that."

"And very good they are, too," said Alison, with a smile in the direction of Darweza as she took another, and that large, hook-nosed, formidable-looking gentleman felt amply repaid.

But when tea was over and Murteza had removed the tea-things, it was another and a very serious Alison who turned to Cunningham to explain why she had asked to come and see him.

"I asked if I might come and talk to you because I simply must talk to some one and try to clear my mind for the future. I've struggled along all by myself so far, and it's no good; I must have outside help. And you were a friend of mother's, and so I thought of you. I didn't want to talk to Mary or Jim Lenox, and in any case I know what they'd say. It's all about John Marlowe, of course."

Alec Cunningham lit the pipe he'd been holding in his hand, and felt considerably relieved. The tone in which she'd spoken had been so intense, so overcharged, that for the moment he had been frightened—frightened lest some trouble was coming over his Dream Lady's child. John Marlowe! That was another matter. Probably something wanted straightening out, and if so, he would do his very best.

"John wants me to marry him," she announced.

"And very, very glad I am to hear it," replied Alec.

"I suspected it a little. Not that he told me anything,

but even aged friends of your people have eyes. I know John Marlowe well, and I think he would make a woman very happy—if she handles him properly. And your mother's daughter could do that—would do that," he added, almost to himself.

"And I just can't, and that's the trouble," said Alison.

"But why?" queried Alec. "Don't you love him?" He had not thought of that before.

"I wish I didn't," said Alison bitterly. "No, I don't mean that—God knows how glad I am to love him. I wish he didn't love me."

"But if you love him, where does the trouble come in?" Alec Cunningham got to his feet, a habit of his when disturbed or thinking hard. Then he remembered that he had a visitor to whom he was talking, and sat down again. This worried him deeply. Here was Alison's daughter telling him that she was in love with some one who wanted to marry her and that she couldn't. All sorts of wild fancies swept over his mind. Why had she come to see him about it?

"You're free to do what you want to—there's nothing to stop you, surely?" Then more wild fancies came into his head—perhaps she was entangled in some way that bound her. And at that moment Alec regretted greatly that he was so little a man of the world, that he had been out of touch so long with life as it is lived by men and women.

"Oh yes," laughed Alison rather bitterly, understanding what was in his mind. "I'm free as the world counts freedom. I've not got a husband or a lover hidden in a cupboard. But all the same I can't marry him. And I'm frightened to death as to what he'll do if I tell him that finally. You see finality is one of

my unfortunate qualities." She laughed drearily, and the turn of her mouth tore at Cunningham's heart-strings. He had seen just that same turn in another mouth very like Alison's, thirty-three long weary years ago. And just then it occurred to Alec how very long and lonely and sometimes how very weary those years had been.

"You've talked lots to me about my mother," she went on. "You knew her and Aunt Adelaide very well. But did you know my father and his people? You haven't talked about them."

And then to Cunningham's fancy it seemed that the slim, straight figure with the white face before him was somehow accusing, for our impressions are very much tinted by our minds. It needed considerable self-control to answer as he did more or less truthfully as human truth goes.

"I knew them—yes—not very well, though."

"And what happened to them—what still happens to them?" she continued. And Cunningham wondered what she was referring to, and was at a loss what to say. His pipe firmly clenched in his wiry brown hand was out now, but he made no attempt to relight it—an unusual thing for him.

"How do you mean? What happens to them?" he went on in a puzzled tone, thinking hard the while.

"Why—that there seems a curse over them—a curse of madness—that half of them die mad," she said.

"Didn't you know that?"

So that was what she was referring to. A weight was lifted from Cunningham's mind, and he realised suddenly that his pipe was out, and reached for the matches on the table next to the brass box of cigarettes.

"Yes—I did know that your father's mind was

affected, and there was some talk about it being hereditary. I remember your mother saying that."

"His father and his father's father. And since then his brother and one sister! If that isn't hereditary, I don't know what the term means," said Alison, in a dead-level voice. "And with that behind me, do you think I can marry any one?"

Cunningham got to his feet again and paced slowly to and fro thinking. He understood now where Alison was, or nearly so. This was the dilemma—this was where she sought help—of him, too, of all people.

"But that is surely a question for John, isn't it?" he said at last, stopping and facing her. "If John is satisfied, I don't see that anything else matters."

"It isn't only for John, it's more than that. At present John wants me, and he'd take any risks. Pass that for the moment. What of the future? Have I the right to do as my father did—with that heritage before me to have children? Will John want children who may go mad? And for me marriage means children," she added quietly. "I'm what people call a practising Catholic."

"I see," said Alec Cunningham, sitting down again. "I begin to see. Life is not so easy as it seems; but then life never is—real life. It's full of sacrifices, if we try to live it properly. So you're a Catholic. Your mother became one just before she died, you know."

"No, I didn't know that," said Alison, in surprise. "No one ever told me that, not even Aunt Adelaide."

"It was practically on her death-bed; probably your aunt was the only one who knew of it—your aunt and myself. Your mother wrote to me before she died—there were certain things she wanted me to do. Your aunt, in those days anyway, was always very prejudiced

on that one point—religion, and probably didn't tell you for fear you might follow suit."

"Which I did, twenty years later."

Then they were both silent for a little while. Alison, taken out of herself for the moment, was thinking of the mother she had never known. It was sweet to think that at the end she also had found the consolation that comes from real belief—had found, as Alison believed, real intimate communion with her Redeemer—that even before she had passed the gate of death she had known what it was to be gathered up by the hands that have given life and hope to so many.

Cunningham was reflecting deeply on the problem which Alison had posed to him. He could well see her point of view, he who had so strongly and so bitterly condemned her mother's marriage with Seymour, for that reason as well as for another. And if he understood her at all, she would in the end go forward in that way—she would, he thought, sacrifice herself and John too. No, life is not easy, he reflected—not if you try to live it properly, as he had phrased it.

Alison's voice brought him back out of his thoughts.

"So there you are, Mr. Cunningham. That's my problem, and unfortunately it's John's too. And there's one other thing that I ought to say to make things clearer. I loved another man once—during the war, it was. And I wouldn't marry him for just these reasons. So he went back and he died. And they told me that he ought not to have—that it was as though he had flung his life away attempting a hopeless task. And I'm afraid now—afraid for John—for what he'll do if I say 'No.'"

"And you want my advice on it all?" said Alec.

"I don't know that my advice would be worth very much, but I will do all I can to help you."

"No," replied Alison. "I didn't really come for advice so much as to be able to talk things over with some one else. That often clears one's own mind. But I do want to know how you think John will take it. You know him so well."

"That also I do not know. But John is a fine character with a high sense of duty. I don't think he would ever throw his life away merely because it had become distasteful. It is not as it was during the war, when most people had perhaps a little lost their balance. For a soldier in action, like the man you spoke of, it is different—action is so quick, one has not time to argue things out. And also, I don't think you can have enough proof to believe that he actually did throw his life away. One could say that of so many brave men who attempted what seemed hopeless things, and so died. I would not think about that any more if I were you."

And then they talked over the other points again; Alison found it easy now to put out her doubts and fears to this quiet grey-haired man who could display such rare sympathy and understanding. But to Alec it was an older Alison who sat there in the evening light talking—pouring out her thoughts. Yes, he had been right—there had been fine heritage of the spirit. He saw again the same willingness to sacrifice if sacrifice must needs be, the same keen desire to do right, unspoiled by any pharisaical or fanatical turn, the same desire to see others happy rather than herself. He was very grateful for this day when she had come to seek his help and he had been vouchsafed this opportunity of seeing into her mind more than he could otherwise

have ever done. It was strange that it should be this same date—the 8th September.

At last Alison rose.

“I must be going now, Mr. Cunningham. We haven’t settled anything—I didn’t think we should—but I’m very thankful indeed for the help of talking things over with you. I’m sure I shall know what to do presently; light always comes if only one has faith enough to hang on all the time. Only, it’s hard at times, and one is very glad of being able to talk to some one who can understand, even if they merely listen. Though you have done very much more than that.”

“I do not think I have been much help really,” said Cunningham, as he walked across with her to the gate. “But I am very glad that you thought of me; it was a great pleasure to have your confidence. I shall think over things and see if there is any way in which I can help. One never knows; if one thinks long enough, sometimes one finds a solution.”

But when she had passed through the gate and down the narrow road to the doctor’s bungalow, it was a long time before Cunningham turned away to go back to his tents, where the dogs were excitedly waiting for dinner, for it was already late. Beyond the low thorn-topped wall bordering the garden, the sky was a blaze of colours as the peak of Mount Sacrifice caught the last rays of the setting sun above the blue-grey shadows of the wide valley.

“Always that—always sacrifice,” reflected Cunningham as he looked at the peak, and suddenly it seemed to him that he had grown very old in a few minutes. Then he shook himself—he had no business to feel like that—there was work to be done that had better be

done to-night. It was no good waiting. It was so clearly indicated as work that he had to do, that he need waste no time in reflection. What the upshot might be he could not say—he thought he knew John well enough to have no fears there; it was for Alison he feared—Alison with the pride that she must certainly have.

Murteza brought dinner at once, and Cunningham was glad of that; the sooner he was alone the better he would be pleased. And he wasted even less time than usual over the meal. But for once he had no company; no little green volume of verses or plays was propped before him as he ate. He ate looking out to the great peak, which seemed to-night so strangely well-named, and which now showed faint but still insistent as an ivory blur on the darkening star-spangled sky.

But when dinner was over and the table cleared away, he went to a locked despatch case that was always placed under his bed, and to which Boris was chained at night, and opened it. He lifted the upper tray, wherein were his revolver, such money as he had in camp at the moment, and various other items. From a partition in the lower part he took out a thin packet wrapped in a worked leather case and, locking the box, returned to the table.

He sat there long, reading through the letters which formed the packet; they were old letters, by the look of them, and by the stiffness of the paper as he unfolded them. Then, in the end, he selected certain of them and put them aside. The remainder he folded up in the case and locked them away again in the despatch case.

Then returning once more to the table, he sat down

and wrote the following short note in his meticulously neat handwriting:

"MY DEAR ALISON,—I really cannot call you Miss Seymour any more after this afternoon, and since I am sending you these letters.

"Will you please read them all in the order in which I have placed them. They will, I think, hurt you. They may destroy many ideals—that I cannot say—I hope not. But I think they will help you in coming to a decision as to the line of action you should take with regard to John.

"One thing only I ask, and that is that you will return me these letters when you have read them. They are very dear to me, as you will understand, and for many years have been my stand-by.

"What you will think when you have read them I do not even attempt to guess. You may judge hardly—youth nearly always does—but I make no defence whatever. That I did wrong I know too well: that I have tried to make amends I think and hope God understands.

"If, after having read them, you do not wish to see me again, please send the letters back by Major Lenox. I shall understand, and, to save you the pain of meeting me, shall advance my departure—my arrangements are practically complete.

"But you will believe me when I say that I am sending these letters only that you may not wreck your life and throw away happiness in error. I think you will understand when you have read them that my life for the last thirty-three years has been ordered partly to one end—your happiness.

"ALEC CUNNINGHAM."

Then he enclosed the note and the letters which he had selected in a large envelope, which he closed and sealed and addressed.

He looked at his watch. It was not yet ten o'clock, and he knew that the Lenox' kept later hours than was usual in Leh; so he took his hat and stick and walked down to the doctor's bungalow, where he was relieved to see the lights still. He wanted to complete the work, and he would not trust these letters to another hand.

The terrier rushed out at him as he entered, and Jim Lenox followed to see what was the disturbance.

"Hulloa! Come in and have a drink, Cunningham. My wife and Miss Seymour have just gone off to bed this moment—they're catching Leh habits."

"I won't come in, thanks, Lenox. But Miss Seymour was asking my advice about certain things this afternoon, and this evening I happened to remember some notes and papers on the point which might be of help to her, so I brought them round myself. I shall be going out early in the morning, and as I have only these copies, didn't like to send them by a servant. Would you mind giving them to her?"

"Right, I'll push them in at her door now—she's only just gone. Sure you won't have a drink?"

But Alec Cunningham wouldn't come in, and after a word or two was gone.

"I wonder what brought him round at this time of night?" reflected Jim, as he went back into the bungalow. "Something rather urgent, I imagine. But I hope it will be of use to Alison—the girl's looking more harassed every day."

Then he knocked at Alison's door—the light was still burning—and delivered over the letter. Had he not been the remarkably sound sleeper that he was, he

might have remarked the shaft of light from Alison's room which shone out into the garden until very late indeed that night as she sat there reading into the past.

Darweza Khan, on the other hand, did remark that his master was unusually late that night—his master who made it an invariable rule when in standing camp to be in bed at ten o'clock. And when Cunningham did put the light out it was not to sleep—it was to lie awake watching the starlit sky over towards Mount Sacrifice, and wondering what the morrow would bring forth.

CHAPTER XX

ALISON UNDERSTANDS

IT was with considerable curiosity that Alison took the packet which Jim passed in through her door. She wondered what Alec Cunningham could have found that was worth the trouble of bringing round so late at night. It looked like a slim book, perhaps one of those little anthologies of helpfulness that seem so popular these days. Only somehow she couldn't quite imagine Alec Cunningham sending that to her as a help in her present troubles.

She opened the envelope and saw the packet of letters it contained tied together with a piece of white tape, and then the covering note which she read. Then she pulled on something warm, and sat down in the arm-chair to try and clear her brain. What on earth could the man mean, and what a quaint tone in the whole note, as though he had done her some wrong, he, whom she had only met for the first time a short two months before.

Then she took up the letters and untied the tape, and realised that she knew the writing—it was a fine, rather thin writing; and though she had never had any letters in that handwriting, she knew it well enough, from some marginal notes made in books that had been her mother's.

There were half a dozen letters—long letters of several sheets each, closely written. They were all to Alec Cunningham, and the dates of them were between thirty-two and thirty-three years back. They were from her mother. Apart from the writing, there was also the signature with the rather peculiarly formed

"A," which Alison as a girl had tried so hard to imitate in her own signature.

The first of them was from Srinagar. So her mother had been in Kashmir after all; perhaps that accounted for her own sense of familiarity which had struck her so when first she came up. The next was from Bombay, the remainder from England.

She settled down to read them without, as yet, suspecting what she was going to learn. But the very first made her understand that what she had thought to have been mere friendship between her mother and Alec Cunningham had been love—deep and lasting love.

And in the second she saw that they had parted, as it seemed to them, and as indeed it had so turned out, for the last time on earth. That was the letter dated from Bombay, where Alison Seymour and her husband were just embarking for home.

But it was in the third that Alison really understood why Alec had sent her the letters, and what bearing they had on the present. The letter made it clear to her that her real father was the man who had just sent her these letters to read.

She let the letter fall back into her lap and sat there dazed, unable fully to comprehend the fact and all that it implied. Her first thought, however, was not relief at the final lifting of the terror which had hung over her so long, but of disillusionment—she to whom her mother had been so much—that her idol should have had feet of clay.

It was not only shame for herself; that also was there, that old-inherited atavistic idea of shame being the portion of the child born out of recognised wedlock, whereas if truth be told, there may be often far

greater shame attending the child of the legal marriage. It was more that she felt shame for her mother, as a flood of primitive, insensate feelings filled her mind, and with them animosity against Alec Cunningham who was responsible.

Then gradually her better self reasserted itself, fired also perhaps by that remark in Alec Cunningham's note, "You may judge hardly—youth nearly always does." No; she would try and judge dispassionately, fairly, before she made any decision as to what she would do in the face of this revelation. And thereupon she took up the letters again and re-read the first three.

She began to see the situation more clearly. Alison Fraser forced into marriage with a man she did not love to save the father she did love—forced, that is to say, in that every possible inducement was brought to bear upon her by her father, who played upon her love for him.

Then the realisation that not only did she not love him, but that she did love some one else, Alec Cunningham, who had only been waiting for a little money to marry her himself. The voyage to India, where her husband had come out to see the world, and had subsequently taken her to Kashmir and there left her to go to Gilgit, then more or less newly discovered.

Alec Cunningham had happened to go in the North of India then with his regiment, and had come up to Kashmir with ideas of exploration in the more unknown parts. And there he had found Alison again. The love they had tried to crush blazed up again, the stronger for the repression, and in the end on to their real great love had been superadded love physical.

And then it was that Alison—mother of Alison—

had written that first letter with its easily understood allusions to the dream-garden of the Nishat Bagh, to all the joys and sweetness they had shared, to the loneliness of the future, for love earthly must stop—their ways must lie apart.

From the second letter she gleaned how George Seymour had returned from Gilgit, brought down by the doctor, showing already ominous signs of the mania which had been his father's. She was able to picture a little journey down to Bombay—her mother, with all her heart left behind in Kashmir, taking the man to whom she had been married back to England; and though the letter was restrained indeed and said but little of that part, Alison could sense that the man whom, when sane, her mother could hardly suffer, now on the verge of madness must have been something that it needed all her mother's fine strength of spirit to support.

Each letter breathed the same cry to Alec Cunningham—to take the hard road, to make life fine in atonement for the past, to keep their love on the high plane where it had been and where it belonged save only for that short time of sweetness that had been too delirious for human flesh and blood to stand.

In the third letter, written after her mother's arrival in England, Alec Cunningham had learned that though loneliness was to be his part in the years to come, yet for Alison the loneliness was to be mitigated, since she would have his child—she was certain now; and though that child would bear another's name—the name of the husband whom the doctors told her could not remain with her much longer—it would be necessary to place him in an asylum for his and every one else's good—yet she and he would have that link.

In the letters written later Alison could read, mingled with her mother's joy at the thought of the child she was soon to bear, sorrow for the transgression of which it was to be the fruit. Nothing of shame; Alison Fraser was too essentially mother, too unselfish, too truly in love with Alec Cunningham, to feel that. But the letters showed also a keen religious sense—or better, a very live love of God—and it was the feeling of having offended against that, that caused the sorrow and the keen desire for atonement—atonement which Alec must also share that thereby they might come together in the end for all time.

And in the last letter—written after her own birth, when her mother knew that she had perhaps but little time to live—there were the same ideas. Only now there was added something else, a passionate desire for the child's happiness.

"She must never know, Alec—*never*. When I am gone, I know you will want her. She will never see George, of course—they tell me it is but a question of a year or two for him, and she will then have no one save Adelaide or George's brothers.

"But if you come into her life, as you will want to, I know—sooner or later she will come to know, even if the world does not, and she will suffer, I think—you must sacrifice that too, as part of the price, and never cross her path.

"Oh, my dear, it seems that I never write to you but to ask you always to sacrifice—I who would rather stand between you and all sorrow, who would give you nothing but happiness. I know how hard and dreary life will be, how very, very lonely—perhaps I alone, who know you so well, can understand how lonely it will be.

"But it seems to me—and I am near to death now, and so perhaps can see more clearly—that by that road alone can we come together again. Had I lived, I too would have trodden it until such time as there should be no further need. But now it seems I am to die, and perhaps that is my share of the punishment—that I shall not have the joy of bringing up our child. I take it so and offer it so—for you. And you who remain—you must make life fine and beautiful for the sake of our great love; you must make the most of all your gifts—do not let anything turn you away from the path which is so eminently marked out as yours. People laugh sometimes at explorers, but it is as truly a god-sent vocation as any other and far finer than most. So hold to it, Alec, dear, it is your path.

"And when the path comes to an end, and, in your own words, you 'come to the last high pass of all,' then, Alec, I do most certainly believe that by the kindness of God I shall be waiting there for you."

Alison put down the letters, and her eyes were very dim. Her mother's ideal was not shattered now but changed, for it seemed to Alison that the picture was finer than the one she had conceived. Her ideal had been built up on conventional tones and tints and traits—it was like a cheap oleograph compared with the fine tone of the portrait that she now seemed to see of the woman who had given her life. This was something greater, finer—great love that sought to give far rather than to receive—and that, therefore, could also speak to the beloved of sacrifice. So-called love that merely takes has no right to ask for sacrifice.

She could understand now what hold her mother must have had over the man she loved, since the gifts she brought to him were of such great price. The love

which he had for her mother must be the love of the man who has tried to do fine things more finely because of the woman he loves, love that will last and grow through a life-time—love that should transcend death.

She read the letters again and again, and each time it seemed to her that she gleaned some new aspect of her mother, finer than those she already knew. That her mother had done wrong, as the world counts wrong, she saw; saw also that her mother considered that she had failed to follow the will of Him who made the world—an infinitely greater matter; saw most of all that her mother had loved greatly with a love which had sustained the whole of a man's life.

And Alison, who was not all conventionally religious on those subjects, felt that if a woman could say that on her death-bed, she had a certain passport to heaven.

No, there was no judgment from her for her mother now that her temporarily shaken balance had restored itself. If she could reach the end of her own life with as little against and as much for on the last account of all, she would be most humbly grateful.

And of Alec Cunningham—her father? It was strangely hard to think of him in that term, and yet how often of late had she said to herself how good it would be to have a father like him. And now that she had learnt that he was indeed her father—though he could not claim the style—how did she feel about him?

It was perhaps fortunate that Alec Cunningham in no way displaced any one—rather he filled, or could fill, a void in Alison's mind. Adelaide Fraser had no liking for George Seymour, and she had spoken of him to her niece as little as possible. George Seymour's own brother, who had been so kind to Alison, had been nearer to a father for her, and he had spoken but little

of George, with whom he had quarrelled frequently and continuously. James Seymour had been noted for his open-handed generosity, whereas George had been conspicuously lacking in that usual Irish characteristic, and there was little love lost between the two. James had taken to Alison for her own sake and also for the real admiration and liking he had had for his sister-in-law, though he had known her but for a short time.

Consequently Alec Cunningham offered to dethrone no one; he stepped in to claim a place which, as it were, had been unoccupied or at best filled with something nebulous and inanimate—like the Skushok's cloak in the throne at Spitok.

That he was her father in the simplest sense of the word meant nothing—that obligation lies initially the other way, until by years of work the parent has transferred the burden of debt to the child. But that he had loved her mother intensely, that he appeared to have ordered his whole life ever since to fulfil her wishes and in the hope of being united to her when he died—that was much.

True, he had done wrong to herself, his daughter—as the world counts wrong—yes. For that she might hate him. But Alison was too big-minded anyway to take that line even without the letters that lay before her. That he wanted her was transparently clear—she recalled the unfeigned pleasure he had shown at their every meeting. And had it not been for her own action in going to consult him, neither she nor any one else would ever have known the past. Hate between a natural child and its parent might come from lack of love, but surely not when love was so clearly there.

No, she would not send these letters back by Jim Lenox, she would take them back herself next day—

to-day rather, since, glancing at her watch, she saw already that it was nearly half-past one.

How it would affect herself she had not so far thought, but now that came into her mind. It spelt freedom from the fear which had hampered all her life. It meant freedom for love and marriage—for children also; and the possession of children was a very passionate desire on Alison's part, one that grew stronger as she grew older.

It meant John, if John still wanted her now, for of course she would have to tell him. That, however, could wait until the morrow. There was much to think over—the whole of life would have to be thought out again from the beginning and on a new basis.

She could not help, however, a certain feeling of injury at the thought that she was masquerading with a name to which she had no right—that she lived on money to which she had no claim whatever—that she whom the world considered very well off was in her own right a beggar save for the little income which had come to her from her Aunt Adelaide.

To George Seymour's money she had no shadow of right; to James' also she had really none, though as a matter of fact James, who had neither wife nor child and none dependent on him—his sister was amply provided for—had left her his money for love of herself and in no sense from love of his brother.

But those matters could wait; for the present she would try to sleep, and if she was in reality a beggar with no rights in the world, at least she had the primal inheritance of every man and woman of which so often, alas, their forebears' misdeeds have wronged them—health of body and health of mind. And to Alison it had always seemed that there was infinitely great

wickedness done in what the world called lawful marriage—where diseased parents brought children into the world to certain pain and misery—than was ever done in a case like hers, which in the eyes of the world was a shameful one.

She undressed finally and went to bed, but when she was in bed she read the letters over once more, and then finally Cunningham's note.

And then she thought of him writing it, and great pity came into her mind at the thought. She pictured him in his tent after she had gone getting out the letters. It had probably been a hard struggle for him to part with those letters which had been so much to him all those long years, to trust them to another hand, to lay open to her those very treasured things. She might have taken it badly—she might have destroyed the letters—she might have done anything.

And he had risked that to help her find happiness. That also was surely love—great love—sacrifice, to her mind, such also as her mother had spoken of.

Well, if John did not want her now, then she would always have Alec Cunningham to think of. She could help him probably, and make such years as were left the easier for him, in giving back the love and affection that he had surely earned by all the years of labour and endeavour.

On that she did eventually go to sleep, and though she did not sleep very long, she woke with a clearer mind and fresher in body than had been the case for the last fortnight—so much so that both Jim and Mary remarked upon it at breakfast.

"What magic spell did Mr. Cunningham send in last night, Alison dear?" said Mary, who saw her first. "They seem to have done you no end of good."

"They were magical—but I don't know about spells. They made me think—perhaps that's what I wanted," said Alison gravely, and Mary, wondering, dropped the subject.

"Whither away, Alison?" queried Jim after breakfast, as he saw her going out to the gate.

"I'm just going across to Mr. Cunningham to thank him for those papers he sent over."

"He's gone out for the day—or so he told me."

So she had to wait until the afternoon, and spent the morning thinking about the future and writing out draft letters to John—each draft being more unsatisfactory than the last. When she had burnt six of them, she gave it up and spent the remainder of the morning in re-reading the letters.

"God knows what Cunningham sent her last night," remarked Jim to Mary, "but it seems to have done the trick. She looks ten years younger to-day. I presume he has solved her troubles for her in some way, and the next thing is we shall have John hopping over the Khardong and all the usual horrors of an engaged couple in the place. I shall go and join Espinasse in the Nubra until they get the worst of it over."

"He knew her people; perhaps he's sent her some records which show that she's no reason to worry so much about the future—that her father's end was due to a head wound from an accident, or something like that," said Mary hopefully.

"That wouldn't account for the rest of the family," remarked Jim critically. "But just at present I feel I don't care what he's told her so long as it makes her happy."

And that was also Mary's feeling when she watched Alison at lunch and tea—a somehow changed Alison—

who looked as if she had had a weight lifted off her and yet at the same time had a great deal to think about with regard to life. Later on she would doubtless hear about it all—in Alison's own time; for the moment she must wait. But to say that she was not intensely curious would be to deny that she was a woman, and Mary was very essentially woman.

Which is doubtless why she was glad when Jim remarked at tea-time that he had just seen Alec Cunningham riding up the road toward his camp, and why, for no particular reason, she walked down as far as the gate with Alison when the latter went out after tea.

CHAPTER XXI

ALEC FINDS HAPPINESS

ALEC CUNNINGHAM sat at his writing-table, where he ought to have been working up notes of the paintings in the monastery he had visited that morning. On a small folding-table at his side stood the tea which Murteza had placed there nearly an hour ago on his master's return, but which was still untasted.

Between Cunningham's mind and the paper—on which he should have been writing these notes for the benefit of an erudite professor in far-away Paris—interposed incessantly the thought of Alison, of what the letters would have meant to her, of how she had taken them, of whether the remedy he had applied might not be worse than the disease.

It must inevitably have been a shock to her—he had realised how much she worshipped the memory of her mother—and all day he had been wondering what result his action would have had, though he had done it for the best, and at considerable cost to himself.

Of her attitude to himself he did not think so much. That she might feel disposed to make him suffer he could understand, and if so, well, it would be something more to the price he had already paid. The road of atonement was long and stony and he had trodden it for many years now.

But subconsciously he hoped that he was nearing the end; that perhaps she might take things otherwise, that she might not judge so hardly, that she might return

him some little of the affection which he would so dearly love to lavish upon her if only he might.

If, however, she had taken it badly, if, in lieu of the affection that he foolishly dreamed of, she offered him only the hate that one in her position might feel for the father who was responsible for her existence, then he would start for Kashgaria at once. It was earlier than he wanted to go, there was work still to be done in Ladakh, and it was most conveniently done with Leh as a centre. But since it would be awkward for Alison to have him in Leh if she wished not to see him at all, then he would go. To remain here, one of half a dozen Europeans, would be an impossible position—they would be meeting continually.

Then he tried to put himself in her position and see what he would have felt in the circumstances. And he failed badly at that—thirty odd years of meticulous work at exploration and archæology had not quickened his imaginative powers—and he realised that the world feminine was a very closed book. He just frankly had no idea—nor could he form one—of what Alison would or would not feel. The only thing he knew was that possibly she might hate him, and if so he would take that fact as something further due from him.

But in any case it should now free her as regards John, open up life for her in all its fulness, and perhaps that might soften her towards himself. And he did want that so much—this man who had longed so greatly for a child of his Dream Lady—who had always longed for that. Some men are made—the majority perhaps—with a love of children for themselves; there is to them a pleasure in the presence of their own children about the house, to see themselves, as it were, growing up again. It is the true race instinct that one sees

everywhere, from the savage of the border hills to the family circle of the English suburb.

But Alec Cunningham was not that way. He had not—never had had—any desire to see himself recreated, to watch a boy growing up, to say to himself, “That is my son, that is myself again,” which is the normal man’s instinct. But to see live again his Dream Lady in flesh of his giving—that was something altogether other, that was something he had desired passionately in the long ago, something he had thought of all these years; the hardest sacrifice of all he had made was to think of never seeing little Alison—who would never know him nor even of his very existence. Time and again he had longed to see her, to use some flimsy excuse to seek her out, even if only for a day. But very faithfully had he fought down that desire—kept to the promise he had made to her mother in the letter she had never read, for she was dead before it reached her, and Adelaide Fraser had returned it unopened—the promise made in response to her last letter.

Only when Fate had flung them together at Hemis—and they had met in spite of his doing—then had he yielded to the sweetness of seeing her, and of making it sweeter by telling her that he knew her mother and so talking of the past, but only of such past as could do no harm.

And so soon after had come this crisis, and he had acted as seemed to him best—to save Alison greater suffering in the long-run. But even now he wondered if he had been right; he had broken the promise he had made, and he dreaded lest he should have failed in so doing.

But if she took things well—if she judged him not—looked only to the love he had for her mother, and the

great love that her mother had for him? Then perhaps she would be allowed to bring back something of real joy to such years as were left to him. If she married John, things would be so easy. That much many people knew—that he had been as a father to John; and that John's wife should in turn treat him as a father would be understandable enough, even if not always usual.

Then, of course, she would tell John all—of that he was certain. Alison would never marry John without putting all the cards on the table—she was essentially honest in all her dealings. And then suppose that John should no longer want to marry her? One could never tell with men; there were quaint, atavistic strains which cropped up at times like these, the primitive desire that the breeding of the woman brought into the ancestral tent should be beyond the slightest reproach. He had heard stories of marriages failing almost at the last moment from things like that.

And then Alison would have that against him to embitter her, even if she were not already embittered. And that also would be more punishment to him to see her suffer for what he had done.

As he thought round and round in circles, in a fashion entirely unlike the more normal Alec Cunningham, the notes on lamaistic pictures remained unwritten—remained unthought even, though the English mail was leaving next day, and the erudite professor in Paris had been very insistent in asking for the earliest possible information to complete the notes he had made for a lecture at a distinguished international gathering.

Then Boris got up from the floor to sniff the air, head on one side. A moment later Nushka followed

his example, and the next instant, with deep barks of delight, they had dashed out of the tent.

Cunningham got up to see what it was—they had a habit of rounding up any unfortunate shrinking Ladakhi or other Oriental who entered what they were pleased to consider as their special domain—to wit, such garden, field, or other enclosure wherein Cunningham's tents were pitched.

But it was Alison they were escorting—Alison drawing close to his tent.

Cunningham's very level, steady heart missed a beat or two, and then raced as he tried to think of what to say. Intense relief crowded over him at the thought that she had come herself, that she had not sent the letters back by Lenox. Then as she came up to him—he felt unable to move at the moment—fear caught him again—fear that she might have come herself in order to let her bitterness have the brutal joy of speech.

Then suddenly he became aware that she had reached him, that she was holding out both her hands. And it seemed to him then that he looked into her mother's face again as he caught her one low word of greeting—"Father!"

It seemed a long time after that they came down from sacred things to the commonplace details of life as it is. That the world in large must remain in ignorance, they were of course agreed. John, on the other hand, must certainly know

"And I must tell Mary, and that will involve Jim knowing," said Alison. "She has heard all my troubles for so long that she must know this—the solution of them. But she will keep it to herself, even you would never guess that she knew."

"It is not for myself that I feared, Alison; it is for you, and for your mother's memory. But I see that Mary and her husband must know. For the rest it will be as secret as it has been all these years—a secret that would have died with me had you not come to me yesterday. Your coming yesterday was a strange coincidence—it was your mother's and my last day together."

"I'm glad it was the day I really came into your life again—as I am now, I mean," said Alison.

"It seemed to me that perhaps it was an indication that I had repaid all I owed, though all the same I feared that perhaps, on the contrary, you would vanish again—this time for good. As I told you, I was afraid of what you might think. I have judged myself hardly often—I could not expect you to be more lenient, but somehow I hoped," he added simply.

"I must write to John and tell him everything," said Alison a little later, "and if John has any silly ideas, then you will have a daughter on your hands."

"I would ask nothing better of fate," said Alec, "only it might be difficult. The world would look rather queerly at us if I adopted a daughter like you, I fear."

"You'd have to learn to look more like your age, instead of getting younger and younger, as every one says you do. Also I shall have to find a title for you now. I really cannot call you Mr. Cunningham any more. But if John is sensible, then I shall call you Uncle Alec the same as he does."

"And that will please me best of all the possible titles. I am sending out my man, Darweza Khan, to John the day after to-morrow. If you like, he can take your letter. He is taking out stores and two ponies

that John asked me to buy for him, and I will arrange for him to stay there a day or two to give John time to answer."

Then that being settled, they went back once more to the past, as Alec filled up the gaps in what Alison knew of her mother's history and of this new-found father of hers, so that it was late before she got back to Jim and Mary, and later still before Jim got dinner.

"And do you think it will make any difference to John?" said Mary to Jim, very late indeed that night, after she had put Alison to bed and then retailed the whole story to Jim.

"It ought to make him d—d thankful," said her husband. "That's the only difference I can conceive it making to a proper kind of man, such as I take John to be. If you mean you think he won't want to marry Alison for the futile reason that her father and mother weren't husband and wife, then he's not the kind of man I've always taken him to be, and you needn't worry to ask him here any more."

"Alison's afraid about it, all the same," replied Mary, as she undressed. Jim was already luxuriously in bed indulging in the supreme vice of smoking a cigarette before going to sleep.

"Then either she's a fool or John's going to turn into a knave," replied Jim. "He's in love with Alison, which any man might be; she's in love with him, wherein in my opinion he's got the devil's own luck. Now, instead of the memory of a lunatic father-in-law, the son of another lunatic, he's offered as father to the woman he wants to marry one of the finest real men I've ever struck—also one who has apparently been the next best thing to a father to John himself in many ways. Even if John was yellow enough inside to worry

his soul about the prenatal antecedents, so to speak, of the woman he says he's in love with, why, the whole business is utterly dead and buried, and barring you and me, not a soul will ever know about it. Go to bed and give up thinking about Alison's future. I think it's about the rosiest kind of one she's ever even seen up to date."

And on the whole that was what Alison herself felt about it once she had got over the difficult task of writing to John, telling him that she would gladly marry him now, if he still wanted her in view of the following; here followed about six pages of Alison's firm but well-formed handwriting.

She handed the letter over to Darweza Khan herself, with instructions to deliver it in person to John, and thereafter reverted to her previous prescription of living in the present, and making the most of such time as she would have this father whom fate had sent to her from out of the past—a father who filled more and more exactly her ideas of what she would have liked her father to be. And as a result, for the first time in his many years' acquaintance with Alec Cunningham, the erudite professor in Paris did not get the material he required by the mail he expected; to be correct, it was two mails late, and he had only just time to scratch up rough notes for the meeting of the international celebrities.

And neither Alison nor Alec Cunningham so much as thought of the erudite Frenchman on their long rides or their walks to visit the places of interest in and around Leh, or on the frequent afternoons she spent in his camp, when he would make her read to him out of that old Browning of hers which had been his gift to her mother.

CHAPTER XXII

HIGH SNOW

JOHN and Espianasse were camped at an altitude of well over 14,000 feet in a hidden valley east of the Nubra—a valley not marked on the existing map, but of whose existence John had read in one of Neve's books. Actually they were bivouacked rather than camped, for there had been only space enough to put up the smallest of the little tents which John had brought up for climbing purposes, in which there was just room for two bedding rolls laid out side by side.

They had commenced their journey with a long and extremely wearisome climb, somewhat north of their camp at Panamik, up a very steep stone slide over which the Panamik people said they were in the habit of leading their goats and sheep to some higher grazing grounds. It had not been mountaineering, it had been merely a Sisyphus-like ascent over an utterly unstable surface, while hour after hour the fertile fields and the trees and houses and little Chinese-roofed chortens of Panamik seemed never to recede in the slightest.

But at last they had pulled over the crest of the hill, on good hard rock, and looked down into this valley which should serve them as a route to their objective, classified vaguely by John as "Really High Snow," and particularised as a point mentioned by Neve nearly twenty years ago, when that energetic explorer, doctor, and mountaineer had climbed in the Nubra with two companions.

"From there," explained John, for at least the tenth time, "we ought to get a first-class view of the main Saser peaks, the watershed of the Shyok Nubra. They're much too high and difficult for us to attempt, even if we could get at them from here, which we can't, according to Neve's book. He says there's a glacier valley about two thousand feet deep in between. But if we make the peak or somewhere near it we shall do our 20,000 feet or over, and that's good enough for me for this trip. I thought I made 20,000 once, but when I got the corrected results up from Dehra, they'd cut it down to 19,800 odd."

"The nearly nineteen above the Mamosthong is my very best," said Espinasse, undoing his boots as he spoke, to replace them with the comfort of a pair of Gilgit boots of felt reaching over his knees. "I had a stinking headache, and shall probably have another this time. But although I'm not a blooming mountaineer like you, I should like to make my 20,000 this year—just to mark my forty-third birthday. Only don't expect me to be sweetly conversational in the early mornings—at anything much over 16,000 I generally bite violently if spoken to before the sun's well up."

The prospect that John had sketched out, basing his plans on the records left by the previous explorers, was a pleasant enough one for any mountaineer. The next day they were to follow up the valley to the highest level ground under the glaciers, where they would camp for the night. There leaving the bulk of their kit, they would push on out of the valley, bivouacking as high as they could get. On the third day from now they would attack the divide itself, and if successful, return to their little base camp under the glacier.

For John it would be an expedition of the utmost

value for his survey work; for Espinasse it was an opportunity, before the years became too great a handicap, of reaching the real high snows. The weather, which had prevented them attempting it when Jim Lenox had come out, was now perfect—day after day of cloudless sky; and it looked like holding. The cold was, of course, much more intense than it would have been the previous month, but they were well provided against that, and hoped the fine weather would to some extent compensate.

For John also the expedition held another prospect. Ever since that day on the Saser, when he had realised where lay all his hopes of happiness, there had been a strange lull in the fears of the high mountains that had obsessed him all his life. He wanted to see now, in attempting to climb higher than he had ever been before, if perhaps they might have been finally slain. They had never deterred him from anything that had to be done, but they had taken the pleasure out of much. Perhaps now he would reap the reward of all the years of struggle.

That would be a very perfect ending to his first season up here, if he could go into Leh—to Alison—to tell her that. Moreover, on their return to Panamik, the mail-runner should be in with her letter, and surely she would write this time to tell him that she would give up thinking about the future, that she would let the future take care of itself and spend the present in giving him happiness and help. The last mail-runner had brought nothing, but then he must have left Leh the day they got back, so he could hardly have expected letters from her. But this time surely he would hear—and hear the news which he hoped for so ardently.

It was dark early under the rocks above the rushing,

glacier-fed torrent which cut its way down in a series of steps to the narrow entry above Panamik village; so narrow and so steep and water-filled at this season, that the local people were compelled instead to use the steep rock slide up the cliff to northward to reach the valley at the lowest point where it became practicable for animals or laden men, such as the dozen coolies, who, a little way from the tent, were cooking their evening meal on the fuel they had brought up with them.

It was a clear, moonless night, and after dinner John and Espinasse sat out a while with their pipes in the starlit darkness, looking up at the great hills that walled them in, talking of mountains and men and of the explorers who, from time to time, had penetrated these little-known hills, until at last the increasingly cold wind, driving down the narrow valley, drove them into their little tent, to the comfort of their bedding rolls and sleep.

And then for the last time fear descended upon John. It began with a foolish recollection of the Dard who had been killed on the Zoji and whom John had been the first to see. The memory of the man's hand pointing his way, as it had seemed on leaving Macchoi, came back to him. Came back too the thoughts which it had provoked, the quaint primitive ideas of Death's latest victim pointing to the one next selected.

It kept John awake wondering. Here he was, within a few days, he trusted, of finding that completeness of life which he had always hoped for—that he had once thought to have found, but which had been snatched from his grasp at the last moment. And he was setting out for possibly a risky undertaking with as his companions only Espinasse, who made no pretensions to

knowledge of mountain craft, and Akbar Khan, whose sole knowledge of rope and axe work was what John himself had taught him on the few occasions hitherto, when a little step-cutting or roping on snowfields and glaciers had been necessary.

And then came the picture of the mail-runner coming in with the letters so ardently awaited, to find a disturbed camp, with only Espinasse there—probably Espinasse would somehow or other be safe in order to be able to tell the story, while he, John, Akbar as well probably, he also had been with John—they were the two first men to see that sinister hand—would be buried under the snow, their bodies perhaps to be washed out of the narrow gorge above Panamik in eighty or ninety years' time. That was about the time they would probably take to travel down in the ice—John's brain was calculating quite coolly and mechanically.

It was a hard fight to drive those pictures out, and it needed all his years of courageous struggling to get the better of the fears. They went at last, leaving him very tired, and when dawn came, after a few hours' broken sleep, he felt that virtue had gone out of him, that he was worth but little, and was glad that Espinasse was not of those who babble in the dawn.

But as they followed up the valley, which grew wider and less steep, and so in time in the full sunlight came to grazing grounds, his courage returned more and more. Later, when after following the sheep-tracks they came to a small lake in an open space under the glaciers, now clearly visible, and found open ground at an altitude of close on 17,000 feet, the last vestiges of the fear had gone and John was himself once more—perhaps more himself than he had ever been.

In front of them the valley was shut in by a great

snow dome below which were ice-falls, and to their right the glaciers sloped up towards a high ridge of snow. Far off they could discern various peaks which John was soon at work identifying, while Espinasse busied himself with the fixing up of camp, sending back some of the coolies who would not be needed for the further advance, to bring up a further supply of fuel.

"This is going to be the highest point I've ever slept at," remarked Espinasse, when John finally joined him. The tents were up now, well pegged down and ringed with stone walls to keep out the wind at night. There was sure to be wind; it seems invariable in such places if one hasn't got proper climbing tents, and neither of them had. Their tents were of the usual Indian pattern, with no floors, although to the small bivouac tent John had added a pseudo flooring of cut-up strips of blankets, on which the bedding rolls could be laid, to keep out most of the draught.

"That is—if I sleep," he added doubtfully.

"You probably will sleep even sounder here," said John cheerfully. "Personally, the higher I get the more I seem to sleep."

It was a busy afternoon sorting out the things they would take with them on the morrow—looking to the ropes and axes, loading plate slides, and charging films. There were rampons also to be fitted—novelties, these, to Espinasse and Akbar Khan—and both Espinasse and John were pretty tired when dinner-time came, and ready enough to go to bed soon afterwards.

But they slept—Espinasse fairly well, and John soundly. He closed his eyes with a determination that no more pictures of Dards or anything else should disturb his night's rest, and perhaps as a return for the fight he had made the night before—the vigour with

which he had fought down the temptation to conclude the trip at the point where they were at present, up to which there was not the slightest danger for the veriest novices—was rewarded by the complete disappearance of the bogies which had so often haunted him.

He slept dreamlessly, only waking once to pull on a little more clothing; and he woke feeling entirely refreshed in spite of the altitude—a big contrast to the previous morning.

“It’s worth coming for, isn’t it?” said he to Espinasse as they set out, the five coolies under Akbar Khan’s leadership following them.

For once Espinasse forgot to bite, although the sun was only just up, and had by no means filtered properly through the intensely cold air. The fascination of the high snow peaks, with its great cornice and ice-falls, gripped him, and for all that there was nothing to shoot and that presently he would be roped and bidden to use that much-disliked article at which he had so frequently jeered—the ice-axe—he was well content with the venture.

“Topping,” said he laconically; “but I want to get on to a peak and have a look round.”

“You’re getting bitten,” laughed John. “You’ll become a climber some day.”

“I don’t mind this sort of climbing, if you can call it climbing. What I object to is the kind where you stand on nothing and contemplate a drop of a thousand feet or so where you can spit. That’s what gives me such a nasty tired feeling. This is gentle and pleasing.”

“It won’t be so gentle when we get on to the moraine in front, and you’ve had two or three hours of moraine hopping followed by *névé* beginning to thaw.”

“Possibly; but at least I can only sink and not fall.

It's my head that's my weak bit. I can plod with any man."

Thereafter increasing altitude induced silence as they made their weary way over the boulders of the moraine, which here offered a less fatiguing path than the ever-softening snow of the great snow-bed over which lay their way to the ridge ahead. John was, however, filled with a strange elation to-day: he had a feeling somehow that the bogies had vanished for ever, and that what had so often in the past been strenuous work, carried out often distastefully, was now about to become the real pleasure which it ought to be to him who felt so intensely the call of the mountains. Probably there was a good time coming—probably the mail-runner was even now on his way with that letter from Alison telling him that she would marry him after all.

And then he thought of what they would do in the future—the mountains they would explore together, the fascinating journeys they would make. Just at the moment there was no thought of Alison the mistress of an attractive house; it was Alison the woman of tents and hills that he looked to—Alison to whom the mountains gave such intense pleasure, to whom wandering was such undiluted joy.

The heat of the sun beating down was beginning to be felt to a considerable degree, and their pace had dropped seriously. They were off the moraine again now—breaking their way across the snow-bed, and roped, which made for slower going, as two out of the three on the leading rope were novices. John leading was presently far too busy probing for concealed crevasses to have time to think any more; all his powers were concentrated now on his task—the task of making his way up to that wall in front, which, if only they

could reach it, would surely give them the height and view they wanted.

At last it became transparently clear that the coolies had reached their limit for the day, and there was nothing for it but to halt. John looked around for a suitable place for a bivouac, and after some searching found some larger rocks on the side moraine which promised shelter, and thither they made their slow way.

The little bivouac tent was fixed up in the lee of the rocks, and the outer fly of another small tent, weighing only some seven pounds, was fixed up as an awning to give cover to the coolies, who crawled under it gratefully enough. For the moment it offered some shade from that blistering sun, and for the night it would be a certain shelter. The sky was still utterly cloudless and promised every hope for the morrow.

"What have we done?" queried Espinasse, as he lay on a piece of dry rock sucking at his empty pipe. The tobacco appetite had left him, but there was consolation in biting on the pipe stem. Food offered no inducement just now, though thirst had made itself felt considerably.

"Getting on for 20,000 by the aneroid," replied John. "But I don't believe it. I'll get out the hypsometer in a moment, and we'll try that. It'll give us another check. To-morrow if Fate's good we'll get our position and height exactly. I bless Mr. Zeiss and his little theodolite. We should have had no end of trouble in lugging up the ordinary pattern provided by the kindly Government. It's a coolie load in itself."

Half an hour's rest restored sufficient energy for Espinasse to get out the meta and the stove, and in the course of time hot tea made its appearance—very welcome.

The hypsometer's contribution to the height question was a matter of just under 19,000, and they adopted that height as probably more reliable than the aneroid, though neither were worth very much.

"Something attempted—something done," said Espinasse. "I've got a shade of a headache, but not really bad. That tea did me good, and presently I'm going to try a pipe. If we don't do more than this I can at least say I have spent a night at 19,000—I'll chuck in the odd hundred or two for luck. That's something to celebrate approaching middle age with. But it's going to be perishing cold to-night. I wish I had one of those beautiful fur sleeping-bags that the American millionaire always rolls up with in this part of the world. Mr. Wolsey—his canvas valise is a poor substitute."

"Think of my forethought in the matter of the hot-water bottles," said John, repacking the hypsometer into its case. "They'll keep us warmish to-night, and give us some water to make a hot drink in the morning before starting. We were mutts not to use them last night. Toss you for the rubber one."

They tossed and Espinasse lost, and so had to be content with the empty whisky bottle sewn up in a covering of felt. But filled with as hot water as the glass would bear, it imparted considerable comfort in the exceedingly cold night that followed. They had, however, possibly gained a little warmth by their endeavours to get dinner—merely pumping up the Primas stove, which John had brought out, was a form of exercise; and it burnt with less heat up there, or seemed to, so that the preparation of a tin of pork and beans and another tin of sausages—good warming food for the occasion—was a very lengthy business.

Sleep also deserted Espinasse that night, and he wondered why he had been fool enough to accompany John on this trip. That feeling was at its strongest about two in the morning, as he lay awake listening to John's rather stertorous breathing; but John at least could sleep after a fashion. A nasty draught further tormented him for an hour, until he finally located it—the sewing of the blanket strips had come undone. He stuffed the gap with a towel and tried to sleep again after deciding that he had not really a headache.

Eventually sleep did descend upon him and lasted in spasms until dawn, when John stirred him to action demanding the whisky-bottle of water. Everything else was frozen solid, including the tin of Maconochie ration which was to accompany them on the climb. Melting that and the remains of the pork and beans from overnight took some time, but fortunately Espinasse's little Meta stove was there as well as the Primus.

Then when the sun was clear above the surrounding heights, the two of them set out with Akbar Khan as third man. The narrow snow-filled valley reflected back the rays in the most trying fashion, and the altitude was making itself felt. Akbar Khan seemed to suffer the least: that tough Punjabi soldier seemed to have acclimatised himself to heights. But frequent rests were necessary even though going was fairly good and snow still hard. Luckily even when they left the valley to climb up to the low col under the ridge they were making for, very little step-cutting was necessary, thanks to the crampons.

A long rest followed there, and when they felt like it, or rather somewhat less prejudiced against it—food.

Then to work again as, roped, they made their slow way up the ridge to the highest point, with on their left

a great cornice, which John carefully avoided. It looked very solid, but it was late in the year, and in any case cornices are not to be trusted.

"Well worth it," panted John, as he drove his ice-axe nearly in to its head, looped the rope round it, and threw himself down on the very summit. Espinasse following him at the moment felt that nothing in the world was worth the headache that he had, but after five minutes' rest he changed his opinion as he sat up again and looked out over the wonderful mountain panorama of snow all about them, and at the immense peaks to eastward—the giants of the Nubra range, 24,000 and 25,000 feet. They were separated from them by a great gulf in which ran the Chamsing glacier, hundreds and hundreds of feet below them.

"Worth it every time," agreed Espinasse, despite his headache. "But I'm not making a habit of it."

John was already busy setting up the theodolite—the stand of which had been carried up by Akbar Khan. Espinasse's load had consisted of John's and his own cameras, and these two articles occupied his attention for the rest of the time he was on the peak.

Two long hours they spent there, and for John they were two long hours of exaltation. It was very close on 21,000 feet; when he had worked out his readings he would get the exact height, but 20,800 was the minimum—it was certainly the highest point he had ever reached in his long experience of mountains. And above all he felt that the bogies were banished for all time—no longer would they haunt him. Why he felt they were gone he could not have said, but the conviction was insistent—they had gone, never to return. It was something to do with Alison, he felt, somehow in some unknown way she had driven them away, perhaps

in facing out her own fears she had faced his too for him. John was not what is called a mystical temperament. Had he been so he might have thought of vicarious action on the mental plane.

All he could grasp at the moment was that he had climbed higher than ever in his life before, and that the bogies had departed for good.

"Well, home, John, I think," said Espinasse, folding up his camera. John had already repacked the little theodolite. Espinasse had loosed off a whole roll of films on the surrounding landscape. Never again was he likely to have such an opportunity, and these were photos that would be enlarged and framed and hung round his room as a souvenir for the rest of his life.

"Yes, I think so," said John, as he took a last look round before they started down. There was no delay thereafter, and midday of the following day saw them at their camp below the glaciers, while on the day after they were glissading down the long stone shoot above Panamik, to the comparatively tropical warmth and luxurious vegetation of the Nubra valley, leaving the kit to follow more leisurely under the care of Akbar Khan.

Their tents in the little garden looked doubly attractive after the last few nights, but what to John was far more attractive was the sight of Darweza Khan's tall figure and cheerful smile as he handed John two letters, the second of which, a bulky envelope, was addressed in Alison's handwriting. There was also the mail-runner with his bulging haversack of letters and newspapers, but of him, for once, John took but little notice, since he had this other letter. A few cheerful words with Darweza, a promise to look over the ponies and stores later, and John disappeared into his tent.

CHAPTER XXIII

JOHN TAKES ACTION

JOHN opened the letter from Alison with very mixed feelings. It was surely going to be all right; in the exalted mood he was in after his successful climb, and still more after the impression he had had that the fears and doubts that had haunted him so long were for ever dispelled, he felt certain that everything was going to be all right now; that to crown all, he would soon have Alison to make life perfect, to help him in every way.

He read on and on, all through the long letter, until he came to the end. Then he put down the letter and tried to grasp the facts clearly. What was it that Alison had said? what was the general meaning of all those close-written pages?

That she was ready enough to marry him now, to give him all he asked for? But . . . But what? Why, that she was not really Alison Seymour; that she was what the world called a "love child"; that therefore perhaps he, John, would no longer want to marry her. That was the gist of it all.

Mingled with the great relief the letter brought, was a feeling almost of anger against Alison—anger that she could possibly doubt what he would say, that she could think that his love for her was so small-spirited a thing that a fact like that might kill it.

She was not an unknown Mr. Seymour's daughter, it seemed; she was the child of the finest man he knew,

of Alec Cunningham who had been to him as a father. And on the strength of that, perhaps John would not consider her a suitable person to be his wife!

"I have no right to anything—no right to all the money which has been given to me. . . ."

Damn the money! He didn't want her money, he wanted herself, the woman whom he felt was the one woman in the world for him. He was no longer a child; he was a man grown, who had looked on life for many years—who, as far as any man may, knew himself—his needs, his aims, his thoughts of life. And therein John did not overrate himself. He was a man formed. Some men form early, some late, but by this time John could honestly say that he had hammered out life for himself—that he was no longer a youth, but a man.

If she felt—and perhaps she was right, though it was a small matter at best compared to other things—that her money was not hers, let her give it away, either to those of the Seymour family who needed it, or if they were well enough off, as he rather thought they were, then to the hundreds of charities she could find. Heaven knows there were enough deserving institutions in the world to whom the whole of her money would be but a tiny drop in the ocean of their charitable needs.

". . . no right even to the name I bear."

And what on earth did that matter either? He was rather glad of that; he didn't like the name Seymour, he decided. Doubtless she could change her name to anything else that pleased her for the sum of five pounds or so—he had an idea that was the prescribed fee—take her mother's maiden name of Fraser if she wanted to. But whether she did that or not—he could

imagine her doing it, though: Alison's very strong honesty would chafe under the idea of masquerade—it really didn't matter, because as soon as things could be decently arranged she was going to become Alison Marlowe for life—a name which in John's estimation was worth all the other names in the world. Inside him, deep inside him, John had a very great pride in his family and in their name, which stood to him for a couple of centuries of very good service to the State. Though it is the modern fashion to mock at anything like that, and the only traditions one is expected to be proud of are traditions of noisy politics, mostly opportunist, or else the fact that one's name is a household word for a patent food or a rapid cleanser of kitchen utensils, which means that perfect social varnish, wealth, John was rather prehistoric in certain matters—his family traditions, in particular.

Much as he had always thought of Alec Cunningham, great as had been the affection he had always borne for the man, just now he felt infinitely more grateful to him than he had ever been in his whole life. He owed so much to Alec already, but now he was going to owe him also the greatest thing that life could offer—the most perfect companionship that it was possible to imagine.

John was in love—he was deeply in love—but it was not the love of the callow youth—a mixed vision of delight merely because a girl has a pretty face and an attractive manner, and the surroundings are suitable—a pleasant river on an English summer day, or the alluring lighting, or lack of lighting, of a sitting-out place in a country house, such as sometimes account for the speed with which the trusted bachelor members of the mess succumb when home on leave after a little

too long of the outskirts of Empire. It was the love of a man of a reasonable age, of a man who had worked and, above all, who had suffered, who had fought with himself in many ways for many years. As far as may be with man and woman, it offered every prospect of being the lasting and enduring article, founded on the rock of real companionship which is the root essence of successful marriage.

John had never believed in Alison's fears. She was, to his mind, too eminently sane for anything such as she had pictured to him ever to touch her. There might be heredity—he was a layman, not a doctor; Espinasse, not primarily a believer in that much-quoted reason for anything people did not really understand, had been grave when he had discussed this particular case. But if there was, then he had always felt there must be some saving clause somewhere for Alison. It had been nothing but a feeling, he had no facts to back his belief—the facts pointed the other way. But he had been right after all; and at that thought he felt now, not proud—John was a humble person interiorly for all that he carried his head high before the world, which is the right and proper thing for a man to do—humility is an interior virtue, not a Uriah-Heep-like external characteristic—pride was not what he felt in the matter; relief and joy at his accuracy better described his state of mind.

No, Alison had always been sane. But now she really did show signs of mental aberration in writing to him like this, and the sooner she was put straight the better. He reached for his writing-case and his ink-bottle; John had never accustomed himself to the fountain-pen—he guarded an antiquated fondness for the steel nib of his ancestors.

Then as he commenced to write the thought occurred to him that the letter would take at least four days to reach her even if Darweza took it. Why not go himself? He could be there in three days, perhaps even two if he hustled and the weather held for the Khar-dong La. He could spare a few days from work—all his men were busy now—they had all got their tasks at the lower end of the valley. If sop to his conscience were needed, he could visit the two surveyors in the Shyok on his way back. Otherwise he could call it leave—he had plenty in hand.

He tore up the few lines he had written, and got to his feet shouting for Akbar Khan. No Akbar Khan appeared, but his rather doddering old servant, Mohomed Din, of the red beard and ancient, pre-historic manners, that always made John think of the old days of the Moghul Emperors—Mohomed Din, who might have stepped straight out of some old manuscript of the sixteenth century, appeared at the tent door.

The presence wanted Akbar Khan? Doubtless, he would be here shortly, but at the moment he was not. He was surely somewhere up on the hill escorting the presence's bedding-roll and tiffin-basket lest these idolators should steal the sugar and tea and the tin of English milk (made in Switzerland, to be accurate, but then one doesn't expect survivals from the Moghul days to be accurate). The soap, however, was surely safe from them. They might lose it, but would certainly not steal it. Meantime, what did the protector of the poor require?

"Ponies," said John abruptly. "Three ponies at five o'clock to-morrow morning. I'm going to Leh."

The ancient understood this—this was the fashion of

the older generation of sahibs. The modern ones made much talk and much bundobust before moving, instead of leaving these matters in the hands of those whom providence had specially appointed to watch over their peculiar vagaries—to wit, himself and those of like mind whose custom it had been to serve rulers even from the days of Jān Kāmpni Bahadur. Had not his own father served a sahib before the walls of Delhi in the year of the bad wind, when the misguided sepoy of Bengal thought that the day of the sahibs was over? Had not his uncle, his father's elder brother, been with Nott Sahib at the second taking of Kabul even before that? Undoubtedly four ponies would be ready at dawn—he would go even now and give the order forthwith. The five ponies should be ready and loaded while the sahib was having his chota-hazri.

“Three ponies, idiot!” said John, trying not to laugh. He knew that had he told Mohomed Din that he was leaving for the moon immediately after dinner, the old man would have shown no sign of surprise. He would have duly ordered ponies, or possibly yaks. Most men would have pensioned Mohomed Din years before, but he had been John's first bearer in India and therefore John clung to him. It was John's way to cling to old servants and old belongings like that, for he lacked the modern commercial spirit which believes in annual stock-takings and cost-accounting, and treats human beings in the same spirit as it treats the dry goods, about which it apparently does know something.

Espinasse, luxuriously contemplating that unpleasant stone slide from the deep comfort of a Rurki chair, was waiting for John and dinner. He had the remains of a headache, which only required a good dinner and a night's rest to banish; but that slight trouble was

forgotten in the extreme pleasure of recalling the events of the last four days. To-morrow he would sleep until the sun had thoroughly warmed his tent, after which he would have chota-hazri in bed in proper fashion—without any preliminary labours with Meta stoves, Primus, or other nightmares of that description. Thereafter a comfortable bath followed by a proper English breakfast which would not have first to be melted out of a ration tin. And for the rest of the day he would further study the effects of altitude on the human body—at rest—not forgetting to nourish it properly every four hours so as to ensure the results being of value.

Meantime, as a prelude to all these good and interesting matters, there was one bottle of champagne reposing in the little water-channel without. It was nominally medicine, but in his capacity as a doctor he considered it should be expended this evening, for the human mind, at rest, also requires nourishment upon occasions such as this when brother ass has just climbed close on 21,000 feet.

He became aware of an atmospheric disturbance in John's tent, and presently saw the ancient emerge and go over to the little gate outside of which John's five ponies were tethered for the night, having just been brought in from grazing.

"What's it all about, John?" he queried, as Marlowe appeared eventually.

"Me for Leh in the morning," replied John laconically, as he shouted for dinner.

Espinasse looked at him critically. He was newly shaved and bathed and there was a light in his eyes. No, he was not apparently suffering from any acute mental disturbance after their exertions. He was, therefore, presumably speaking seriously.

"Leh—whatever for? I thought we were down for a rest-day to-morrow." Then he remembered the letters Darweza had brought. John's face did not give the impression that he had received bad news. Then Espinasse bethought him of Alison—one of the letters had certainly been a woman's handwriting. That was probably it, and for once he felt really curious about the affairs of his fellow-man.

"Whatever for?" he reiterated.

"To tell Miss Seymour that we're going to be married in Srinagar as soon as the work here closes down and we go into winter recess. I've got two months' leave up my sleeve, and I'm going to take it then."

"Stout fellow!" said Espinasse, reaching the bottle of fizz from the bucket in which his bearer had just brought it from the water-channel, which, if not yet ice, was at least ice-fed. "Stout fellow!"

"And you, of course, will be best man," added John. And then they turned their attention to the bottle to celebrate High Snow and Alison Seymour's impending change of name.

It was after dinner, when the servants had gone and they sat out with their pipes—well muffled against the crisp cold, for winter was beginning now—that John unburdened himself. He felt that Espinasse ought to know—he already knew so much—and John had talked to him as a man can talk to a real friend. Espinasse was the only man other than Alec Cunningham to whom John would have given that title.

"Good show," said Espinasse when it was finished. "You're both in luck this time. What a relief it must have been for her, because I don't think there was any doubt about the future looking extraordinarily black.

And I'm not a tremendous believer in heredity as a rule. And so good-bye to my Europe morning to-morrow. I'm coming in with you."

"Stout fellow," returned John. "We're going to hustle some; but you can make it up in Leh—telling Jim Lenox what he's missed."

Hustle they did next morning, although they only managed to make the twenty-eight miles to Khalsar that day, even with John's own ponies, which were considerably faster than the local hired dzos, donkeys, and starveling yabus. John wanted to push on to Khardong, but was eventually dissuaded to wiser counsels. The road was not too good there—a corniche road above the Shyok, and no moon.

"No earthly use killing your ponies to get in a few hours earlier. You can make Leh before midday the day after to-morrow, and that's good enough," expostulated Espinasse. And so John fretted his soul out at Khalsar until the following morning, when he got the doctor and the baggage on to the road again before the sun was up, having sent on Akbar Khan mounted to Khardong village as fast as he could to arrange for transport over the pass.

They made Khardong by 10 A.M., and there had to wait for transport. But they were off again by midday, and the evening saw them camped at the very foot of the pass which John intended to climb before daybreak, leaving the transport to follow.

Dawn saw them at the top, and since the yaks were too slow for his taste, John set off on foot down the other side, with the intention of picking up any mount he could find *en route*. It was several miles before he did find one; he was more likely to have found nothing, but luck was still in, and as he debouched into the more

open valley whence you get the first sight of the upper fields of Leh, he met a friend in the shape of a Leh merchant who had been in the Nubra valley fleecing the Yarkandi caravans, and from him John borrowed a pony for the remaining miles into Leh.

It was not the best of ponies, but it could amble somewhat faster than he could walk. And thus he finished his journey into Leh, and before midday was riding in under the chorten gate, into the winding little street that led to the European quarter, and so to the Lenox' house.

Alison was indoors that morning; Alec Cunningham had gone to visit a monastery, and for once she had not accompanied him. The French professor had at last vindicated his claim to some of Cunningham's mind, and he was making amends for his most unwonted delay in taking photos of the particular frescoes his friend wanted. They would be late, but that was better than nothing. Jim was in the hospital, and Mary had gone across to the dak bungalow to see a couple of belated visitors.

Alison was theoretically writing mail letters—rather a difficult task this week; in actuality she was wondering if her letter had safely reached John, and when she could expect a reply, and also what the reply would be. But she didn't like to think about that too much. She turned her attention again to her letters, and then realised that she had been absent-mindedly scrawling on the blotting-pad, and then and there pulled off the top sheet and tore it into very small fragments. She had had no business to scribble on it like that; "Alison Marlowe" in her handwriting was not a thing that might be left lying about, even if she had done it subconsciously.

Then she heard a disturbance without—the terriers were at the top of their form. She went out to the rescue, casting a glance to see if the first-aid outfit was handy. Jim in despair had installed a first-aid outfit in the hall, in which were packed some nickel coins with which to sweeten the application of the iodine to the injured portion of such incautious Ladakhis as entered the garden without first advising the servants so that the dogs might be restrained.

But there was no Ladakhi. Instead, there was a rather tired and hungry-looking pony standing with a lost look in the drive, while up the steps came a large and very determined-looking, muddy-booted man, at whose heels two terriers yapped in delirious joy, snapping at his dusty coat as they leapt upon him in pure affection: a large-sized, unshaven man with a skinless red nose and a bristly, prickly chin, who took hold of her very firmly, and in the intervals asked her what the devil she meant by writing him an insane letter like the one he had had at Panamik. Only he didn't give her any particular chance of answering his questions; in fact, he didn't seem to want a reply—his questions were merely rhetorical.

Some time afterwards, Mary Lenox, returning from the dak bungalow, found an ownerless pony grazing in her garden, and was duly wrath, calling for servants who came not. Then she entered the house, and tripped over a whip, a heavy Yarkandi whip, which she picked up and thereupon recognised. It was John Marlowe's one exotic possession; most of his gear was very rigidly and puritanically English. Being an authoress and an understanding person, she therefore remembered that Jim would be leaving hospital shortly, and for once

disguised herself as the dutiful wife and went to fetch him.

"He's come in himself," she said to Jim, when she located him in the hospital. "They're so occupied that they didn't hear me shouting for the servants to chase the pony out of the flower-beds, so I came down here to fetch you."

"I get you," said Jim; "I thought it was a puzzle limerick when you began. Sensible fellow—much better to come in than to write. Our John hasn't got a fluent pen any more than he has a very fluent tongue. But I expect he can make himself understood much better in other ways. What do we do now?—I'm hungry. Any hope of food to-day? If not, I'm going round to the European shop to buy a tin of something to eat somewhere in the wild and woolly."

"We'll go and warn Alec Cunningham, and after that we might safely go home. However much in love John may be, he must have come over the pass to-day, and he probably hasn't had anything to eat."

"Thank God for that," said Jim.

They did not find Cunningham; but Murteza reported that he would be back in time for tea, so Mary scrawled a line on his note-pad, and then they went home, making a duly noisy entrance, which this time did draw attention. John confessed that his day's food had been a cup of tea and a khurla at four o'clock, and that he could easily deal with lunch, in spite of the fact that he and Alison had arranged to be married in Srinagar in December.

Then he remembered Espinasse, whom he had last seen a long way behind wearily crawling up the steep north face of the Khardong, and his conscience smote him as he asked if any one had seen or heard of him.

They had not, but they put aside a noble lunch against the time he should arrive.

He arrived very much after lunch, with even more traces of the mountains upon him than had John. The four days above Panamik, and this morning on the pass, where he had been delayed by one of the ponies slipping and cutting itself badly, had burnt the skin off his nose and turned the rest of his visible skin to a boiled-lobster hue.

But he was exceedingly cheerful, and spent the afternoon in filling Jim with envy at the luck which had attended their second venture to reach really high snow. In fact, he so depressed Lenox at the thought of what he had missed, that the promised sonnet to celebrate the occasion failed to materialise.

"They've disappeared," said Mary eventually, when, in response to Jim and Espinasse's request for tea, she had gone in to see if the others would face another meal—it being quite three hours since the last. "I expect they've gone round to see Mr. Cunningham."

"Good—all the more honey for me," said Jim. "Ladakh is a good country."

"It is a country of dreams—a country where dreams seem to come true and nightmares disappear," said Mary, thinking of John and Alison.

Jim dropped his pipe heavily. "Mary, if the habit of writing is going to make you sentimental, I shall go seek a practical, business-minded movie actress to console me."

But Mary refused to be drawn—she was in serious mood, thinking of Cunningham's camp and wondering what was happening there.

As a matter of fact, it was a very commonplace scene, and very correct, as one would expect of any-

thing to do with Alec Cunningham of the Central Asian glaciers. All three of them were sitting outside the tent with the dogs, and they were not talking much.

Alec Cunningham in particular was very silent at that moment, as he looked out over the heads of the two people who were dearest to him in the world. Only just then he was not looking at them so much as at the great peak of Mount Sacrifice, which hung, a mass of gold-tinted ivory, against the cloudless evening sky. And he was thinking—being interiorly, like John, rather a humble soul—that such sacrifices as he had made, and just now they seemed so small that it was hard to see them at all, had been visited with reward on an infinite scale.

CHAPTER XXIV

ALEC CUNNINGHAM TAKES THE LONG ROAD

DARWEZA KHAN was in his element to-day—the 1st October—as he stood, obviously vested with authority, in the garden of the British Joint Commissioner's house at Leh, closely surrounded by large quantities of baggage and wooden boxes already roped up for the road. He was also surrounded at a more respectful distance by many Ladakhis; and still farther away were fifteen nice-looking ponies—obviously no hirelings these—were they not Cunningham's own animals, to the feeding and grooming of which Darweza had extended his solicitude? The Arabs say that it is the eye of the master which makes the horse fat, but the eye of an ex-cavalry trooper of the class of Darweza Khan is probably even more effective. Still farther in the background some twenty stout yaks roamed about in a leisurely fashion, munching the short green grass which is the glory of that garden in its setting of great arid hills.

He was at the moment in conversation with a notable-looking gentleman in a long, plum-coloured robe and a purple Chinese cap above his long pig-tail—the Zaildar of Leh, who, if the Namgyal dynasty were still on the throne, would be Prime Minister of this strange little kingdom. As it is, he serves the Dogra administration in a more subordinate capacity, while the eldest descendant of the kings of Ladakh seeks consolation in the religious life at Hemis, and his eldest

son lives in theoretically royal state, but with no power, in his castle at Stok across the Indus.

As Zaildar, the Khaloon was responsible for the provision of transport for travellers, and, having produced the yaks and their owners, was now listening to Darweza's ideas of how the baggage was to be loaded. They were meticulous, for Darweza had marched some good few thousand miles in the wilder and better parts of the earth, and knew well the importance of, firstly, a good distribution of loads at the start and, secondly, of splitting up one's possessions. If a yak disappears over the edge of a glacier, it is more comforting later, if you are in luck, to spend a few hours extracting the pieces of the theodolite and the second camera from a nasty mixed mess of strawberry jam and cooking butter, with the comforting reflection that another load also containing jam and butter and spare instruments has now safely reached the more solid ground, two thousand feet lower down, than it is to sit on the edge of an apparently bottomless crevasse with the realisation in your mind of the fact that the missing animal beneath your feet carried the whole of your year's supply of oil, for instance, or was charged with the instruments—the sole instruments—with which the work of the expedition was to have been carried out.

Having explained to his satisfaction how things were to be done, Darweza allowed the Ladakhis to approach and take up the loads, having first attached Boris' and Nushka's leads to two ice-axes. They had a prejudice against seeing their property handled by the pig-tailed ones. On the whole, the Ladakhis followed his instructions reasonably well, and he only had to interfere twice—rather a record morning.

Most of the animals were already loaded when Alec

Cunningham appeared and called Darweza, to give him final orders as to the camp which he was to pitch on arrival at the larsa below the Khardong pass.

The Lenox' and Alison were accompanying Cunningham as far as the pass, the former going really only to give Alison company on the long ride back the following day, and Cunningham was pitching his own tents for them to save them taking out theirs. Darweza listened to the orders, and then went off to transmit such of them as were necessary to Murteza, who was going with the advance part of the convoy—the faster moving ponies who were just about to leave.

Cunningham saw that all was loaded up, and then looked round the garden which had been his permanent home on and off for the last three months—as much of home as he ever had. But this time, although he had often camped there in the past, it seemed more his own somehow; it had held so much for him this last month, it had known such crowded hours of joy, that it was hard to leave. Ahead lay months—indeed, more properly, years—two years, probably—of the long road and the mountains and the glaciers, the naked, stony hills and the glaring, sandy road. And Cunningham, who had firmly suppressed all such feeling for so many years, felt a little pang at his heart at the thought of leaving this quiet garden with its shady trees and its cool grass lawn.

Then resolutely he turned his back on it and passed out through the gate down the white-walled road to the Lenox' bungalow, where he was to lunch before setting out for the ride up to the larsa. Outside were waiting four ponies—two belonging to Mary and Jim, his own with the gaudy saddle and trappings, and one that he had just bought for Alison, a very good-looking

bay Yarkandi. It would be useful to her for the following year when she came back with John, who was now out again in the Nubra at work until the end of the month.

As he turned in at the Lenox' gate it was with a feeling that it was the last time for many months that he would have a meal in any place even so civilised as Leh. It would probably be his last journey to the Heart of Asia, and if he came back this time, well, perhaps he might consider himself entitled to settle down quietly for such life as was left—buy some little place at home where Alison could come—Alison, and perhaps Alison's children.

He would have liked so much to have waited for Alison's wedding in December or January, but that would have meant putting off his departure until the following year, and all his arrangements were made. Moreover, at his time of life every year was important to him. Also, after all he could not very well make such a big change in his plans, plans known to many scientific bodies, for the wedding of some one who was no relation of his, even. That last thought hurt somewhat, but he hadn't time to pursue it as he entered the little garden and so into the bungalow, where he found the others waiting for him for the meal which they called lunch for lack of a better name—an old-fashioned Indian meal scheduled for eleven-thirty, so as to allow of a cup of tea later before starting.

Such meals are difficult at best, but they kept firmly to the proximate future—to the details of their return to India, of the wedding, of John and Alison's plans for the following year.

"Perhaps it will take two years more," said Alison hopefully. "He says it's a big job; and then we shall

be able to come out and meet you on the Saser on the way back and bring you home."

"I shall count on that," said Cunningham; but in his heart he felt somehow that it wouldn't happen, for he was not optimistic in that way to-day.

The early afternoon saw them on the road out of Leh to the Khardong pass, which lay up that long valley ahead. A crowd of friends had come to set Cunningham on the road—he was well known in Leh; while there was another and larger crowd to see his men off. There were two or three Yarkandi merchants whom he had known in their own country, and who bade him *au revoir* until they too should follow him; there was the old, grey-bearded Charas officer whose acquaintance Cunningham had made years before in Gilgit; there were odds and ends of people of all sorts and nationalities.

Then at last they were alone, as they followed the steadily rising road, with the gaunt, stony hills on their right—bare hills, with *mànés* and *chortens* along their feet to show the road to the incoming traveller; and on their left the little irrigated fields that only two months before had been emerald with the bearded grim.

Mary and Jim rode a few lengths ahead all the way. They were understanding people, and so Alison was able to spend the three hours of the ride in a long talk with the father who had come so late into her life and was now being taken away again for so long. There was so much to talk of, so many things that she wanted to hear or to re-hear; the three weeks they had had together had seemed so short, and now there was less than twenty-four hours left.

To Cunningham, however, mixed with the sorrow at the coming parting was also the wonderful joy of this

ride with Alison beside him. He had never pictured that as possible, never thought that when he set out once again to the work to which he had devoted his life, in his endeavour to make good, to make atonement, to build a lasting monument to the wonderful love which had coloured and transfigured the whole of his life, that their child would ride beside him. He had worked unremittingly in response to that dying request, "You must make your life beautiful in memory of our love."

Whether he had succeeded was another matter—Mrs. Dashwood would have been emphatic on the point. But, as Alec himself felt, "the work is with us—the event with Allah"; only to himself he would have used another name than Allah. And perhaps in the eyes of the God who meant so very much to Alec in his own peculiar, probably unorthodox, fashion, there was much that was beautiful in all he had done—in the meticulous compilations of glacier movements, in the dry-as-dust study of the great mountain ranges; for after all He made the mountains and the glaciers, and therefore they must be beautiful, and the study of them contain their reflected beauty. Most of all, perhaps, was there beauty in the steadfast courage with which Cunningham had faced all the hardships and dangers attendant on that study. One likes to think so, anyhow, and in thinking it one has the support of his daughter, who told him so candidly. And it was good to Cunningham to hear that verdict from the lips, so like her mother's, which not so long ago he had thought would give him only condemnation.

The winter dusk was drawing on as the larsa received them, to the lamp-lit comfort of tents in contrast to the cold and greyness without—coldness and greyness re-

lieved, however, by the last rays of the sun on the great snow peaks in the distance, and on the splintered rock crests above them, freshly powdered with the new-fallen snow of the day before. But to-night was cloudless once more; presently there would be a waning moon just past the full to silver the scene around them.

Dinner was a brisker meal than lunch had been: lunch was a meal at parting, this was one on the road; and the sorrow that always attends a setting out on a long journey was already tempered by the call of the road, the call that every one of these four understood so well.

Jim, who could be adaptable when he chose, had the right note; gone for the present were the sonnets and misquotations. Instead, he drew Cunningham on to talk once again of the high mountains and the glaciers, and presently the elder man warmed to his subject, and they had him at his best, talking enthusiastically of the great wonders he had seen and would so soon see again.

And Alison was content to listen to that now, for in her was growing the mother feeling towards this grey-haired, young-eyed father of hers, who had had so very little of life, nothing but unremitting work through the years. It was good to see him in a boyish mood like this, talking of the more adventurous side of that work, speaking of the charm of the mountains which had softened for him the months and years of dull plodding with instrument and pen, seeking always to add to the knowledge of those who could not come to the far, wild places—giving of his best that others might see from their armchairs.

And then at last bed claimed them, and when Jim and Mary were gone, Alison followed their example—

to sleep in Cunningham's own tent, which that night he had forsaken for a little climbing tent. He said he would like to think that Alison had used it once.

But she did not get to sleep at once; she lay awake thinking over the past, over all that had happened in the last nine or ten months—the journey out from home, the road up to Kashmir, the long road to Ladakh and the journey over the passes. There was so much that had happened, so much had changed in life, she had such infinite gifts to be thankful for. Through the open lattice in the tent door she could see the moon shining on the snows, and she thought of her first view of the snows at Gandarbal, and her prayer then:

I will lift up mine eyes to the hills,
The hills whence cometh my help.

She had indeed lifted her eyes to the hills—she had entered up into the mountains; and indeed there she had found the help that she had asked; more than help—joy and happiness in full measure.

Then another phrase recurred to her mind, from the opening psalm of the Mass:

Et Introibo ad altare Dei,
Ad Deum qui lætificat juventutem meam.

And I will go in unto the altar of God,
Unto God Who giveth joy to my youth.

Surely she in some measure—and in great measure her father had done that—entered into the high snows, which, if any place can be called the altar of God, are most worthy of that title. And joy indeed had been given to her youth, and she prayed that she might prove as worthy of it as, to her mind, had proved this new-

found father of hers, to whom joy had not been greatly given. But then he had perhaps been given something of infinitely more worth in the long-run.

Then lastly, she prayed for him—that he might not be lonely on the long road; that her mother might walk beside him in the hard places and the places of peril as he had told her she had—so it seemed to him—so often done before; and that if, as might happen, he should come to die in some far-off, lonely place, that she might be there with him.

Dawn broke in cloudless splendour to see them getting ready for the road again. There was no snow now on the south side of the pass, so that an early start was not necessary, as it had been when Alison had crossed before; nor would there be soft snow on the farther side—only hard ice, better descended in daylight.

Alec Cunningham, first out of his tent, stood looking at the pass above them. He had slept well—was he not once more on the road? And he felt more courage to-day, more courage for the months ahead. It was not confidence that he felt; there was no idea that all was going to be easy, that all would go well, and that less than two years would see him coming back from the other side again. But it was courage to face whatever might come, readiness to leave this short-lived, new-found happiness and face whatever might be ordained.

As he looked up at the pass, however, it seemed to him that for him the Khardong would be Pisgah—that from it he would see the promised land for the last time; that there he would leave Alison whom he had been allowed to see for such a brief space; that for his transgression full happiness would not be granted here;

that he should see neither Alison nor Alison's children in the future.

But nevertheless he was content—content to go forward alone, to round off a life-time of work, to make amends if might be in such fashion as he understood the only one he knew. For since God must be a master-workman, Alec hoped that his fashion would be understood by Him who had made the mountains and then made man to climb them.

It was a perfect morning when at last they reached the head of the pass and stood there watching the laden yaks and the ponies making their slow way up the boulder-strewn slope below them. To northward, the great peaks stood out clear and sharp, white against the blue of the sky. There were the Saser giants to the east of the hidden Nubra valley, and beyond these showed other farther peaks of the Karakorum range, below which lay the glaciers and snow-bed of the Saser pass, where at the end of the week Cunningham would be passing on his way to the Karakorum pass and so to Kashgaria.

Mary gave them breakfast from the lunch-basket which she had brought—one of Mary's best—as something for Alec Cunningham to look back to. But to Mary it seemed a sacramental sort of repast, for she felt somehow—though why she could not have explained—that Alec Cunningham would never more come back over the Khardong, that this time the high snows or the great deserts would claim him, and that he would find release there out in the far, wild places where most of his life had been spent.

She phrased it thus mentally, "find release," for Alison had told her much and the rest she had imagined to herself. She was not a novelist for nothing. She

felt, therefore, that if Cunningham did not come back it would be because he had found real happiness at last—complete happiness such as the world can never hold. For once Mary felt quite certain about the future; only, as always, it was not at all the kind of future of which her early religious upbringing had tried to convince her.

The caravan was all up now; the ponies had struggled over the last rocks separating them from the smooth snow on the pass itself, and stood there somewhat breathless and weary, but considerably less lifeless than had been John's ponies when last they had been here. The laden yaks were dotted about in the snow—dead black in the glare against their white background. Darweza, very business-like in his clothes of the road, long-skirted puttoo coat and breeches, with somehow a cavalry turn to them for all that they were supposed to be plus-fours, stood with his whip hurling mixed Turki and Pashtu at the uncomprehending Thibetan yakmen.

Presently they were making their slow way down over the slippery ice of the farther side, moving with infinite caution, for whereas in the early summer in the snow it had been merely laborious and painful, it was now more dangerous for the laden beasts. If they slipped now they might roll indefinitely, and perhaps be smashed with their precious loads against the rocks that showed lower down.

The long caravan straggled downwards amid the warning shouts and yells of the yakmen; the servants followed; the led ponies tailed after them with snorts of alarm and displeasure; last of them, Cunningham's own big pony with the gaudy trappings.

Jim and Mary came up to Alec to say good-bye;

they had a sense of time and place, and then removed themselves to the farther side of the plateau to busy themselves with the camera; taking photos of the peaks far off.

And so Alison and her father were left alone there on the snow, with behind them the valley leading down to Leh, where lies the road to civilisation and all that Cunningham had given up so long ago lest some day those things should interpose between him and Alison's mother. Before them showed up clearer and clearer the giant ice-bound peaks above the great glaciers; symbol of the work to which Cunningham had turned his hand.

"Good-bye, Alison," said he at last, "good-bye, and earn happiness as you know how." And he bent down to touch the lips she lifted up to him in farewell.

Then he was gone, and Alison was alone on the snow watching that tall spare figure striding down the farther slope; striding on out of her life. Once again her eyes were dim as she thought of her father in the time to come—alone among the mountains—leading once more that lonely life which for these few short weeks had been gladdened for him by her company.

He turned once and waved to her, and then, with Boris and Nushka plunging and slipping over the ice at his heels, went on down the slope until he was lost to sight, and Alison turned to rejoin Jim and Mary now waiting for her with the ponies under the lee of the pass.

But to Alec Cunningham of the glaciers, as he went onward over the ice—for all that he had thought of Pisgah, had thought of it more than ever, as he had turned and waved to that solitary figure standing on the white snow high above him—there was now no more

thought or fear of loneliness, neither now nor hereafter.

To-day he was certain that when the end came it would not be in loneliness. To-day he was convinced that when with failing breath he should struggle step by weary step up that last pass of all towards the shadowed cloudy crest, in the sunlight of the farther side he would find waiting for him Alison—mother of Alison.

And she would take him by the hand to lead him to the feet of Infinite Love; to the feet of the most perfect and sinless figure which has ever sweetened our earth; to the feet of Someone who would understand Alec Cunningham and Alison—mother of Alison; Someone who said of Mary Magdalen, "Much is forgiven her because she has loved much," and of whom His enemies said with perfect truth, "Lo! a friend of publicans and sinners."

